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Nelson Novels

GRIM CHANCERY

John Melrose, summoned to the Norfolk Broads to preserve young Paul Thurston from kidnappers, had an exceedingly nasty shock when he saw him being tipped out of an aeroplane by his own half-sister. Paul's parachute fall was well timed, and the kidnappers awaited his landing.

From the moment when John lays his plans for a rescue the excitement never flags until the last page is reached. The headstrong and lovely Marcia proves to have right on her side after all : John's forced landing has a fortunate end : and though he is captured in the wild hunt through the woods, in his amazing duel he proves yet again that fortune favours the brave.

This is a thriller in the grand tradition, full of plots and counter-plots, brave deeds, and hairbreadth escapes. Mr. Woosnam Mills is a real find : he will rank with Mr. Dornford Yates and "Sapper"—and his readers will look eagerly for a sequel to put beside *Grim Chancery*.

~~AL-07~~ / 138

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GRIM CHANCERY

a novel by

WOOSNAM MILLS

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD
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TO
THE ELF AND PETER
WHO PERSUADED ME

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CHAPTER I : A SUMMONS IS ANSWERED

JOHN MELROSE was at peace with the world ; the peace that comes when the immediate prospect is pleasant. In a couple of hours he would be dining, and dining as a man should dine, in the company of friends at a table where his host knew the value of good wine, good food, and immaculate service. After dinner they would discuss their plans for this month of August, and some one would discover the correct ingredients of sun and leisure. One thing he himself would urge : they must get away from London. The place was an oven, where the pavements roasted the feet, and where the air felt as if it had not been changed for months. London under these conditions was definitely a place to avoid.

He threw open the windows of his flat and gazed for a moment down into the lethargic activity of Bruton Street. Even the taxis seemed to wilt on their wheels. Decidedly, it was time to escape, and he strolled back to his chair, picking up a handful of letters on the way, and pressing the bell before he subsided into the cool comfort of leather and turned his attention to the still cooler comfort of a drink.

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Presently the door was opened.

" You rang, sir ? " his servant inquired as he stooped to pick up a letter which had fallen to the floor.

" I did, Price. To-night I am dining with Mr. Lockhart. I shall require my dinner jacket and the car."

" Very good, sir."

" Oh, and Price . . ."

" Sir ? "

" It seems highly probable that we shall be leaving here for a while, destination unknown ; objects, relaxation and fresh air. On the whole an excellent idea, don't you think ? "

" London is certainly not at its best just now, sir."

" Quite. We as usual agree on matters of moment. Perhaps you will pack a bag or two, the holiday bags, Price ? "

" I have already done so, sir. It occurred to me that you might be making a sudden departure, sir."

" Very sound reasoning, Price. I may be able to stand one more night, but that is positively the limit. And now will you mix me a deep bath ? This drink is almost a joy of the past."

Price stood his ground. He had information to impart.

" Excuse me, Mr. Melrose, but Sir Charles rang up half an hour ago."

John looked up in surprise.

" My father ! Nothing wrong, was there ? "

" He seemed rather anxious to know whether you had received his letter, sir."

" What letter ? "

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"I rather fancy this is the one, sir. It came this afternoon while you were out."

John put down his glass and took the letter which Price had selected from the heap and was now holding out to him. His father was not one to write letters, preferring the telephone and friendly foregatherings as a means of maintaining contact, and he ripped open the envelope in some perplexity. The message it contained was brief, but he read it through twice before looking up to find Price still at his elbow, an expectant look in his eyes.

"So this was why my bags were packed, you old fox!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you know what's in this letter?"

"Sir Charles did not inform me," Price answered with a twinkling gravity, "but I understood that he was worried and that you might wish to see him."

"You bet I do, and this very evening. Cancel the bath and the dinner jacket, and hurry along the car. We leave in half an hour."

"Very good, sir. Shall I inform Mr. Lockhart of the change in your plans?"

"No, I'll do the explaining. All leave cancelled until further notice, that's the order of the day. Now, let's see you sprint."

The suspicion of a smile lit Price's grave face as he caught the eager note in John's voice. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, and there was expectancy in the glance.

"Fun and games, I do believe," John told him in answer to the unspoken question.

"All the indications point that way, sir," Price

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answered with satisfaction, and moved smoothly from the room to go about his duties.

When he was gone John gulped down the rest of his drink and stood up. The comfortable ease of a few moments ago vanished from his manner ; his thoughts were no longer of a pleasant dinner and a comfortable evening among friends ; even the heat that rose from the pavement below his room, and was blown in hot gusts through the open window, ceased to trouble him as he made the few plans necessary to speed this sudden departure. He had always made a point of being ready to take up his bed and walk when the occasion arose, and as this was undoubtedly one of those occasions, he got to work at once. A telephone call to his father to assure him of his arrival in time for dinner was soon over. Sir Charles did not volunteer any further information, and John asked for none, but he noted that Price had not exaggerated ; his father was decidedly jumpy. Tony Lockhart came next, and although disappointed he made no difficulties. John expected none. His friends were well trained, and he smiled as he thought of the speculations that would float round Tony's dinner-table with the port.

A couple of letters, since he did not know how long he would be away, and he hated to leave with things and people at a loose end, and he sat down to smoke until Price came to tell him that the car was ready.

Sitting there, his long legs stretched carelessly in front of him, and his blue eyes thoughtfully following the smoke from his cigarette, he presented a picture of contented ease. A friend dropping in for a chat would have talked of horses, cars, the general social round

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and their mutual acquaintances, and would have gone away convinced that Melrose had no other object in the world than to enjoy himself with all the zest that money and position and a host of friends can bring. His laughter was pleasant to hear, and when he stood on those feet now thrust out at their ease on the carpet he was a couple of yards high, with broad shoulders and the build of a runner. In his manner to all who crossed his path he was easy and good-tempered, unless they gave him occasion to be otherwise, and that is perhaps why the casual friend dropping in for a talk and a smoke would have gone away without seeing anything remarkable in him. Some one more observant would have noticed that his eyes, half-closed and dreaming over some reminiscence, changed their colour as readily as water under the sun. A cloud has only to come along and the blue becomes hard and opaque ; in summer the blue has a dazzling brightness, in winter the cold gleam of ice. His voice, too, had qualities which matched his eyes. It was as pleasant as his laugh, speaking all words as they were meant to be spoken ; but there were times when the winter in his eyes was matched by the winter in his voice, and when that happened there would most certainly be trouble for some one ; the sort of trouble which no man faces gladly, and which few men seek twice.

When you have eyes and a voice of this kind it is as well if you learn to control them. Unless you have yourself well in hand they are apt to give you away. John Melrose had found that out to his cost more than once, and had set out to achieve a mastery over himself. Poker is one way ; a minor diplomatic post abroad is

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another ; intelligence work in the East is a third. John had tried them all, and now, although his thirtieth birthday was still six months in the future, he had so far succeeded that few people even among his closest friends guessed the depths that lay beneath the smiling surface. Of those few his father and Price were two.

His cigarette was about half-finished when Price returned to announce that the car was at the door, and the luggage bestowed.

"Good man," John exclaimed. "Five minutes up on schedule. Have you warned the keeper of the flats of our departure ? "

"I have, sir, and he hoped you would have a pleasant holiday by the sea."

John laughed.

"So that's where we are going—officially ? I hope you didn't choose Margate."

"No, sir. I took the liberty of hinting that it might be abroad. Somewhere in the Adriatic."

"I bet that had him guessing."

"It did, sir. He said he'd never heard of it."

John chuckled his appreciation, and led the way downstairs and out into the street, where his car was waiting. He noted its lines with appreciation, and slipped behind the wheel with a sigh of content. He liked breeding, whether in things or people, and this Bentley with its long green body was certainly a thoroughbred.

The engine quivered to life under his foot, and then died to an expectant grumble while he waited for Price to take his place beside him, then he slipped the

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gear lever into first, and a few moments later they were threading their way to the Great North Road.

"Tell me, Price," John frowned, after he had spent a laborious quarter of an hour warding off the attentions of several hundred cars all apparently trying to reach the country before him, "why is the road littered with family tens all driven by wandering imbeciles?"

"Bank Holiday week-end, sir. To-day being Friday, August the first, they are all off before the rush. . . ."

"Before the rush, did you say? What on earth do you call this procession?"

"Just the advance guard, sir. The lucky ones who don't have to work to-morrow."

"Well, I hope they work better than they drive—and here, thank the Lord, is the Tower Garage and the end of Mr. Belisha's parental control. I'm in the mood for speed, Price, bubbling speed; speed at any price—and that's a joke, so hold your hat."

To a nervous passenger their progress from that moment would have been sheer purgatory, but Price was used to hurtling along an already overcrowded road with the speed of an express train, and he had complete confidence in John, who handled his car as if it were a green lizard twisting among a horde of black beetles. The family tens dropped behind, whole strings of them, with their loads of perspiring humanity, like cattle trucks. The hum of the engine grew louder, soon they were passing faster cars, which had outdistanced the rest, and each time John hooted a derisive challenge until a lone driver in a Lagonda waved in answer as he drew level and then gave chase.

From that moment driving was a pure exhilaration;

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everything else was forgotten ; all that mattered was the winding road ; hand, eye, and foot, working in unison at bends, cross-roads, hills. The Bank Holiday fathers only existed to make the game more difficult, and contentment was only to be gained by keeping ahead of the Lagonda.

For half an hour the duel lasted. Twice John was caught in a traffic block ; once a useful lead was lost because the lights were against him, but the Lagonda was still drumming at his heels when he came to the turning that led to his father's house. He signalled and slowed up to allow it to draw level ; then he turned to look at the driver. Much to his surprise the driver was not a man, but a girl. A leather helmet concealed her hair, which must, he judged, be black to match her eyes. In spite of the speed at which they had been travelling she was as calm as if she were sitting in an armchair, and she examined him coolly.

"Do you often do this sort of thing ?" he questioned.
"I mean, aren't you afraid Mr. Belisha will get to hear of it ?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. She was not amused, and John had an unpleasant feeling that her heart was as cold as her nerves.

"I merely wanted to see how fast your car would go. Last year's model, isn't it ?"

John didn't quite like the tone of that remark. It seemed to show a lamentable lack of car manners, and taken in conjunction with the fact that her Lagonda was undoubtedly new it savoured of snobbery.

"The year before," he answered mildly. "And did you find out how fast this old veteran can trot ?"

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Once more the rather contemptuous shrug.

"I couldn't hold you on the corners," she said.

"My shock absorbers want tightening."

John's smile was positively dazzling.

"I thought there must be something holding you back," he countered. "Thanks for the fun anyway. This is where I turn off."

The girl barely acknowledged his salute before letting in the clutch and storming away towards Norwich. John watched till her car was out of sight.

"There goes a girl I should like to meet again, Price. Arrogant, hard as nails, spoiling for trouble—do you think a slipper, steadily applied for five minutes, would do any good?"

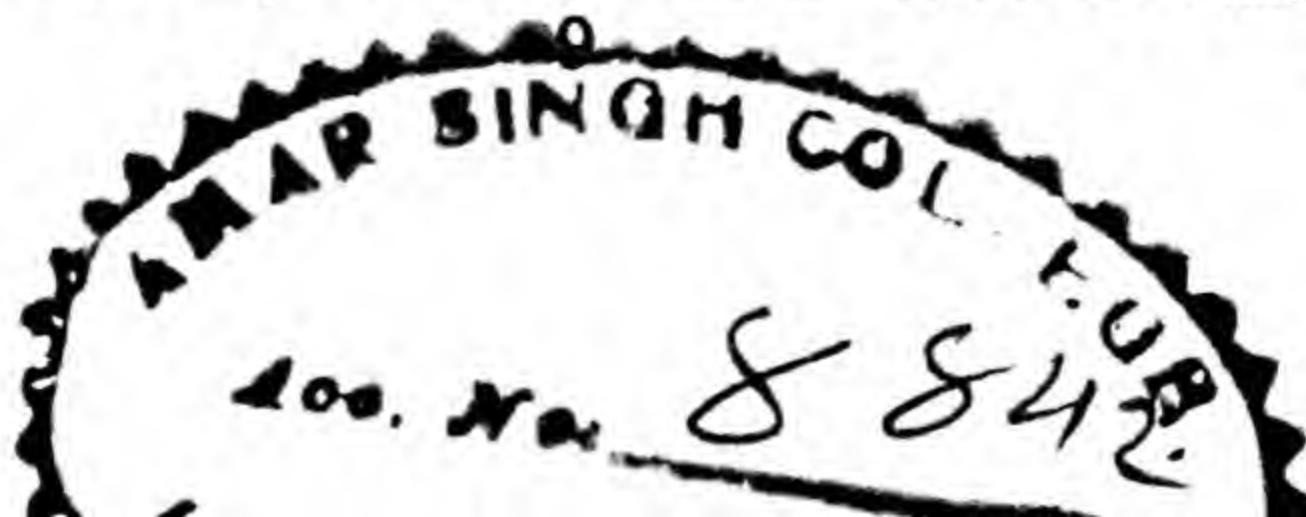
The question was rhetorical as Price knew, and he wisely said nothing. After a while, the Lagonda having passed out of earshot as well as out of sight, John turned the Bentley down the road which led to Mildenhall, a mile or so beyond which lay his father's house.

During dinner, which followed as soon as John had bathed and changed, no mention was made of the letter. Sir Charles, after one appraising glance at his son, began to talk of the hundred and one happenings which had bridged the gap between this meeting and the last, and although the large panelled room was empty except for themselves and the butler who watched over their needs, they did not notice the emptiness.

Father and son were well matched in bearing and intelligence. Inheritors of a past that climbed down the centuries, they were at their ease in this room

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where the polished board, the gleaming silver, and the fine stemmed glasses had witnessed the entertainment of princes. They enjoyed each other's company, and they gave of their best, so that when at last they threw down their napkins and strolled arm-in-arm out of the room, the pictures of their ancestors on the walls might well have said if they could that the past still flowered in the present, even though it was clothed in a dinner jacket, and caparisoned steeds had been changed to motor cars and aeroplanes.

Night was falling, a breathless end to a sun drenched day, as they drew two chairs towards the open french windows. A lawn, closed in at the far end and on each side by huge beech and cedar trees, swept almost to their feet, while the mingled scents of flowers from unseen borders assailed their nostrils. John settled down into his chair with a sigh of content and waited peacefully for his father to begin.

Sir Charles waited until the butler had drawn a table between them on which to place a decanter and some glasses, and then had gone from the room, before he turned to look at his son in the waning light.

"I suppose my letter has raised your hopes?" he asked with a slight smile. Except that his hair was grey and he was of a slighter build, he was very much like John.

"At least, it brought me here in a hurry," John answered. "When I tell you that Price was ready packed before I'd read it, you can see which way we thought the wind was blowing."

"Price, too, eh? I must learn to control my feelings

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over the telephone. So you still listen to the old warrior?"

"I've never known him to be wrong yet."

"Well," Sir Charles answered rather hesitatingly, "I hope you are not going to be disappointed."

"Impossible," John assured him. "Even if the hunt is off, I am more than glad to have come. London was a human furnace, whereas this is heaven. I could go on sitting here, talking to you, smelling those flowers, watching those shadows until doomsday. Take your time, and don't rush your fences, or, if you prefer it, leave everything till morning—I won't ask a single leading question."

Sir Charles smiled and then frowned at the glowing end of his cigar.

"Have you any plans for the immediate future?" he asked.

"None that can't be dropped. According to Price I am already somewhere in the Adriatic."

"Then perhaps I had better start from the beginning. Not that there is a great deal to tell, but I would like to give you as clear a picture as I can. Have you heard me speak of a man called Thurston—Frank Thurston?"

"No. The name means nothing to me."

"Well, he's a rum sort of fellow. I knew him well at one time, and although I have not seen much of him for a good many years, I ran into him by chance yesterday at the Maid's Head in Norwich. We had a meal together and . . ."

"One moment. I'm sorry to interrupt, but what was this rum fellow to you? Friend, enemy, or passer-by?"

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"He was at Eton with me, although somehow he never quite seemed to belong. He used to haunt me rather, and I'm afraid I did my best to shake him off."

"One of the species hanger-on?"

"More or less; there was something pathetic about him, as if he wanted to atone for being alive, and then, by a stroke of irony, I came to owe him my life. It was quite simple. I was standing in the road talking to a friend, while Thurston hovered on the outskirts hoping to join in. There was a high wind blowing, and it was difficult to hear. Suddenly, without any warning, I received a tremendous push between the shoulders which sent me flying into the ditch some yards away. When I picked myself up I found Thurston lying on the ground with half a tree on his leg."

"Good Lord!"

"He must have heard a snap and looked up to see the bough falling. Anyway, there is not the slightest doubt that what he got on the leg would have landed on my head, and as his leg was crushed—he still walks with a limp—I should probably have been killed."

"Your rum fellow was certainly plucky."

Sir Charles nodded thoughtfully, and returned to his tale with a wry smile.

"Yes, I could hardly avoid him after that, could I? Gratitude is not always an aid to friendship, but I did my best. I pulled him together mentally and watched over him physically, with the result that he went abroad to seek a fortune. He is now master of more money than is good for one man, and he lives at Hammer Lodge, near a place called Coltishall. . . ."

"On the Broads! He still haunts you, then!"

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"I didn't know that till yesterday. Fifty miles is still a long way even in these days, when you happen to be more fond of horses than of cars as I am."

The two men smoked in silence for a while. John had thought he knew most of his father's past history, and was surprised that he had not heard this illuminating little episode before.

"When a man has saved your life," Sir Charles continued, "you naturally feel that you ought to like him. I tried, but we had nothing in common, and I began to wish that I could find some way of paying the debt. That seemed to be the only way to freedom—and yesterday the chance came. But even now I can only discharge the debt by proxy. Do you think that will count?"

"Sure thing if I am the proxy."

Sir Charles continued more cheerfully.

"When I met him yesterday Thurston looked so ill and drawn that he reminded me that I am an old man. Mentally he was back to his school age, and clung to me as a limpet clings to a rock. After lunch, which I can assure you was a painful meal, I led him into a corner of the lounge and asked him what was the trouble. It appears that he has a son of fourteen who came home from school three days ago. By every post since the son arrived Thurston has received an anonymous letter warning him that the boy is to be kidnapped before he returns to school in the autumn!"

John received this startling statement with a lift of the eyebrows, but without comment. If the threat were genuine there would be no doubt about the fun and games, but he wanted to be sure first.

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Sir Charles seemed to be waiting for some comment, but as none came he continued in quiet, level tones, staring straight ahead at the outline of the trees against the now almost dark sky.

"I, of course, suggested the police, but the idea was not well received. I then proposed an armed guard, or the removal of the boy to a secret destination. I even suggested that he should come here. All useless. He turned my solutions down as fast as I could think of them, and then I asked what I should have asked at the beginning. Had he an enemy of the kind who would resort to that type of blackmail? I thought he was going to have a fit when I mentioned the word blackmail. He quivered as if I had struck him, he went white, and I saw why he did not want to call the police. His alarm seemed also to rule out the obvious suggestion that the whole thing was a hoax. After a while he grew calmer, and I asked him a few questions. The answers were that he has a daughter by a former wife, that she and the boy Paul are his only children, that his second wife has left him, although not officially, that he has a secretary and five other servants living in, besides half a dozen chauffeurs, gardeners, and lodge-keepers—none of whom he trusts. He seemed to think it was useless to oppose the kidnappers, and that the only thing to do is to wait for their terms once they have the boy."

"But that is absurd!" John cried. "Unless he puts up a fight . . ."

"That is what I told him, but he was half-demented with fear. He was terrified lest in trying to protect the boy he should make the kidnappers brutal."

"Something in that," John admitted. "An armed

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guard about the place might end in some one being shot—and that some one not necessarily the kidnapper."

"Exactly—and yet something had to be done."

"So you called on me!" John rose and stretched luxuriously. "Don't worry, something shall be done. There is nothing I like better than rough-housing with kidnappers . . ." He broke off suddenly to peer at his father, whose shirt-front and cigar were the only visible tokens of his presence. "You don't suppose the whole thing *is* a hoax, do you?" he asked anxiously.

"No, I do not," Sir Charles reassured him, and he sighed with relief.

"That being so, the first problem is how to tuck the lad under my protective wing," he said. "I might even have to kidnap him myself. Give me to-night to think it over and I'll tell you my plan in the morning."

He was turning away to take the problem with him into the garden, when he heard a chuckle come from the direction of his father's cigar.

"Don't think too hard, my dear boy," Sir Charles murmured. "I settled that little difficulty with Thurston yesterday."

CHAPTER 2 : DOUBTFUL WELCOME

"THE devil you did!" John exclaimed, spinning round on his heel. "You're a mighty quick worker—but then you always were," he admitted, as he sat down again and leaned eagerly towards his father in the darkness.

"Let's hear about it."

Sir Charles chuckled once more. He was pleased with the impression he had made.

"It occurred to me," he said, "that among your other accomplishments was a moderate degree conferred on you by your late university . . ."

"Emphasis on the moderate," John laughed. "Yes, go on."

"And that therefore you would make an admirable tutor for the boy."

"A tutor! But the lad goes to school."

"Only for the holidays, of course. So far Thurston has told no one at Hammer Lodge about these anonymous letters. I suggested that he should pretend that he was not satisfied with his son's progress at school, and that he wished to engage a tutor as soon as possible."

"But how does that let me in?"

"The secretary was to put an advertisement in *The Times*—and it is that advertisement which you will answer to-morrow with laudable speed."

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There was no doubt in John's mind that the plan was a good one. Even supposing that the secretary was in some way connected with the gang, he could hardly suspect a tutor who came in answer to an ordinary advertisement. And later, when he did suspect, he would have to suffer the embarrassment in silence or give himself away. What was still more to the point, the unforeseen addition to the household might force an alteration in their plans, and John knew from experience that second thoughts of that kind were much less efficient than the original.

"What do you think of the idea?" Sir Charles asked at last.

"Nothing could be better," John answered enthusiastically. "It will give me custody of the boy, and the right to be near him day and night. If there is an accomplice in the house I ought to spot him, and then the rest should be easy."

"I hope you are right. Save the boy and you will take a load off my mind—and off Thurston's. Besides, kidnappers are unpleasant people."

John laughed at this understatement. He knew exactly what his father felt about the whole affair, and he was eager to be on his way. However, no more could be done that night, and with one consent they banished the subject from their minds and talked of other things.

Some time in the early afternoon of the next day the green Bentley once more took the road. The day was perfect, a slight breeze tempering the summer heat, and John was in high spirits. Villainy and the

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scheming of rogues seemed preposterous on such a day, and he was inclined to take the adventure more lightly now that he was on his way to the scene of action.

Price, sitting beside him, grave and unbending, had been primed in the part he must play during the preliminary skirmish. This was simply to instal himself at an inn which they had discovered from the map, and which lay about half a mile outside the boundaries of the Hammer Lodge grounds ; once there he was to wander about and find out the lie of the land as well as encourage gossip. John did not expect great results from this activity, but the inn provided a meeting-place, and there might come a time when an ally would be useful ; especially when that ally was Price, whose quiet manner and small body concealed a quick intelligence and wiry strength.

The car drew up outside the station in Norwich, and Price got out, taking with him one small suitcase.

"To-morrow or the day after we'll play darts and drink a pint together," John told him.

"Very good, sir," Price answered, and stood back while the car slid away from the pavement and continued its journey.

Seven miles of fair road, with a bridge at the end of it, led John to the village of Coltishall. Hammer Lodge, as he had taken pains to discover, was two miles or more farther north, and he kept on his way with one eye on the signposts and the other watching the countryside for a first glimpse of the house.

He had perhaps covered a mile, and was passing a small wood on his left, when he heard the explosive

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stammer of an aeroplane engine starting up no great distance ahead of him. The sound seemed to come from a field which lay beyond the wood, and as aeroplanes held an irresistible appeal for him he quickened his speed. The roar grew louder as he came to the last of the trees. The airman, whoever he was, was spending no time on a preliminary warm up. John, cursing the hedge which obscured his view, saw a gate fifty yards farther up the road, and he drove rapidly towards it, only to clap on his brakes and duck his head instinctively when he arrived. The aeroplane was coming straight for him with the speed of the wind and a crackling roar which deafened him. A shadow came between him and the sun, he was buffeted by a sudden blast of wind, and he caught one glimpse of spinning-wheels and a glistening body seemingly within a yard of his head before it was gone.

"Whoever is flying that ship is as mad as a hatter," he cursed as he climbed out of the car to retrieve his hat, which had been blown into the ditch. "Sheer, blind lunacy to do a thing like that ; he ought to be kicked, and I'd be glad to do the kicking."

Feeling thoroughly mad he glanced up to see what had become of the plane, and discovered that it was just completing a loop ; it then proceeded to do most of the known stunts in so crazy a manner that he gasped. Fortunately, the roads were deserted, or more than one motorist would have driven into the ditch. Never more than five hundred feet up, except when at the top of a loop, the aeroplane was often no more than twenty. It skimmed the trees, bending their tops with the wind from its propeller, hopped over the hedges,

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rolled and banked with a nightmare precision, and twice it dived over his car as if the pilot was trying to read the number plates or wipe off his under-carriage on the bonnet.

When that happened John quite unashamedly ran for cover. He was convinced that the pilot was either mad or drunk, and that disaster would follow. It would then give him a grim pleasure to pick up the pieces, and if by any chance the pilot was unhurt to rectify that omission at once.

But the particular angel who looks after the unwise was at his most potent that afternoon, and after ten breathless minutes the pilot shut off his engine and prepared to land.

Then, for the first time, John noticed a large shed with its back to the road, and beside it on a tall pole a white "sock" showing the direction of the wind. This field was evidently a private landing-ground.

That the pilot was choosing to land down wind was not surprising ; compared with the follies of the past ten minutes that was of no account, especially as the wind was slight, but it was the final touch which made John decide to have word with him. He decided that that word would be far from pleasant, and he vaulted the gate and walked up to the hangar towards which the plane was now taxi-ing.

It was then that he saw the Lagonda.

Later, when the incident of his second meeting with the girl recurred in his memory, he always insisted that he had been expecting no one else ; she was the only person to whom such reckless behaviour was not only natural but inevitable. At the time, however, he just

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stood still and gazed at the car, and then looked up slowly to where the girl was climbing out of the cockpit.

She was dressed in breeches, a suede jacket, open at the throat, to show the white of a silk jumper that clung tightly round her neck, and a leather flying helmet. She was as pale and unconcerned as when he had first talked to her over the wheel of his car.

She recognized him, of course. Indeed, she had probably examined him from the air, and had swooped down on him deliberately, but beyond a slight nod and a wave of her hand towards the wing that was farthest from her, she paid him no attention. The wave was explained when she began to fold back the other wing.

Without a word John stepped forward to help her, then between them they pushed the aeroplane into the shed and closed the doors.

For some minutes now he had been controlling a natural desire to put her across his knee and give her that beating which he had mentioned to Price. His hand would serve even better than a slipper, and he would go on until she cried for mercy or his hand broke off at the wrist.

However, the impulse towards physical punishment was forestalled by the girl, who threw him a careless word of thanks over her shoulder and sauntered towards her car. The gate to the field was closed, but she no doubt expected him to open it for her, and with a meekness which was altogether out of character, he walked away and swung it back on its hinges.

He did not miss the almost imperceptible frown and the puzzled look in her eyes which greeted his

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subservience, and he was glad that she was intelligent. To have added an inability to read character to her other faults would have made her a burden not to be tolerated ; as it was he leant up against the gate with a pleasant tingle of expectancy and waited for her to make the next move. The fact that his car was straddling the gateway was sufficient assurance that the move would not be excessive.

She turned her car with the quick, decisive skill which he had come to expect from her, and then drove towards the gate. When she saw that there was no room to pass he watched her eyes flick from side to side as if gauging the possibilities of the grass verge ; but not even she would contemplate taking her car across a two-foot ditch, and he was delighted to see a faint flush of annoyance stain her cheeks.

“First blood to me,” he thought, and lowered his eyes to hide his satisfaction.

“Would you mind moving your car ? ” she asked icily.

“Not,” John answered calmly, “until I have had a few words with you. To begin with, I would like to point out that quite half those spectacular tricks you performed for my benefit are infant’s stuff, and the rest you did very badly. If you must show off I advise you either to be sure that your audience is composed of idiots or to take some lessons.”

He had drawn nearer to the car as he spoke, and now paused to smile pleasantly, expecting an angry comment, but she continued to stare straight ahead through the windscreen, and except for an angry tightening of her lips and the clenching of a small hand

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on the steering-wheel, she gave no sign that she had heard him.

Secretly admiring her composure, he applied the lash once more.

" Apart from a display of poor aerobatics, your behaviour was that of a criminal lunatic. People who stunt a few feet over public highways and force motorists to abandon their cars ought not to have a licence. Unless you apologize I shall report . . ."

The girl turned to face him, and he saw that she was smiling. He saw too that her eyes were not black ; they were blue, so deep a blue that only when you looked full into them could you see the colour. He was so surprised that he fell back a step.

" You looked like a rabbit bolting into its burrow," she said with a mocking lilt. " But you seem to have recovered your nerve—and now would you mind moving your car, or isn't the lecture over ? "

" Not nearly. I was going to add that had you been a man I should most certainly have punched your nose. As things are I shall be compelled to see you home and have a talk with your father—unless you would prefer me to choose and to inflict punishment on you now ? "

" You talk like a schoolmaster ! " she said contemptuously.

" But that is what I am," John answered patiently. " My pupil is waiting to receive me at Hammer Lodge—you know the place, of course ? " he added, as he saw her sudden look of interest.

" Oh yes, I know it, but since when has Paul had a tutor ? "

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"Paul?"

"Don't be absurd," she flashed. "You haven't been engaged to teach Mr. Thurston or . . . or his daughter!"

"I wonder," John answered, meeting her eyes. "What do you think—Miss Thurston?"

The thrust was pure conjecture, but it went home, and he turned on his heel without waiting for a reply. With leisurely precision he propped open the gate, which had swung forward while they were talking, and then he reversed his car until there was room for her to pass. The way was now clear and he sat waiting for her to leave.

As if she knew he would try to follow closely on her heels, she wheeled out of the gate and swept up the road like a black squall. John gave her a hundred yards' start and a wave of the hand before setting off in pursuit. He hummed contentedly to himself as his car gathered speed. Even if the kidnapping proved a frost, there was likely to be plenty of interest at Hammer Lodge.

From the landing-field to the house was rather more than a mile, the final two furlongs being up a well-kept drive. John turned into the gates less than fifty feet behind the Lagonda and, pressing hard, was on her tail when they reached the final bend. The girl was holding the crown of the road, but he was not to be denied. Pulling over till his wheels were brushing the right-hand verge and his near-side wing was lapping her tail light, he sounded his horn. She swerved; she couldn't help it because the summons was of the kind that demands instinctive obedience. For a

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second, as she recovered, he thought she was going to crowd him into the ditch and he set his teeth, but at that moment the drive widened out into a gravelled sweep in front of the house, and his car headed hers by inches before he set foot and hand to the brakes and pulled up with locked wheels.

He glanced over his shoulder at the marks left by their sliding tyres, four furrows in the otherwise unruffled surface of the drive, before looking at the girl.

"My race, I think, Miss Thurston," he said grimly.
"Next time, I hope you'll not try to kill me."

She was sitting slightly forward, her hands loosely holding the steering-wheel; her lips were parted, revealing white teeth, and her eyes were shining, but she returned his gaze with pale composure.

"I take back what I said about the rabbit," she said with a soft laugh. "There is nothing wrong with your nerve—but I'd like to know why you are here?"

"And so would I, sir!" an angry voice shouted from the porch, which they had overshot by a couple of yards. "What do you mean by storming up my drive like a lunatic!"

Melrose turned to see a furious little man standing on the top step. He was waving a stick in impotent rage, and showed signs of having been thoroughly frightened by the whirlwind approach of the two cars. John recognized him from his father's description and went to meet him.

"My name is Melrose—John Melrose," he declared, and then added quickly as he saw an almost furtive gleam spring to his host's eyes, "I must apologize
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for bursting in on you in this way, Mr. Thurston, but your daughter has been giving me a driving lesson."

"Marcia behaves like a hooligan," Thurston grumbled. He flung a malicious glance at the girl who was coming up the steps. She looked from one to the other as if expecting her father to continue his outburst and order the intruder off the premises, but his anger had unaccountably subsided.

"Mr. Melrose—since that is what he calls himself—assures me that he is to be Paul's tutor," she said.

"I am afraid my claim was premature," Melrose interrupted hastily. "I am here in answer to Mr. Thurston's advertisement—but perhaps we could discuss the appointment later. You said something about tea, Miss Thurston?"

She made no attempt to contradict him, but led the way imperiously into the house.

Melrose was following when a slender figure came from behind a pillar and gazed at him rapturously.

"I was watching," he said breathlessly. "You beat her! Some day I shall drive like that!"

Solemnly John held out his hand.

"You must be Paul," he said. The boy nodded and ran on ahead. The sallow face and heavy lashed brown eyes were unmistakably Latin, and John felt a sudden liking for the shy creature who had overcome his shyness to pour out this unexpected praise. Until this moment he had not thought much about the boy, except as a pawn in the game, but a few words, a smile, and a flash of disappearing legs and a tousled head had quickened his interest.

Tea was a strange meal. Mr. Thurston was obviously

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ill at ease, and sat with downcast head, moodily indifferent to his guest. John noticed that his game leg was supported by a rest attached to his chair, and that he kept his stick by his side. Sir Charles had not mentioned that he had to use a stick, and Melrose felt a quick wave of sympathy for him.

Every now and then Mr. Thurston cast quick glances at the boy, and as quickly lowered his eyes when he thought he was observed ; at Marcia he did not look at all, even when she brought him his tea.

Melrose was puzzled to account for the antagonism between father and daughter, but there was no point in making heavy weather of the going, and he set himself deliberately to lighten the atmosphere, and to win the boy's attention. No one else seemed to wish to talk, and with the field to himself he explained that although he was not much of a scholar, he had seen Mr. Thurston's advertisement and, being at a loose end as well as in need of pocket money, he had thought there was no harm in trying . . .

"Men who run Bentleys need more than pocket money," the girl interrupted sarcastically.

But Melrose had foreseen that objection and he explained with engaging frankness that his embarrassment was temporary, but that unless he got a job he would have to sell the car and that would be a minor tragedy.

"What do you think ?" he appealed to Paul as a man appeals to Cæsar. "Wouldn't you help me to keep a car like that ?"

Paul, who at first had hidden himself in a far corner of the room, but whose eyes had not left Melrose's face

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and who had gradually drawn nearer as if fascinated by the man's easy strength and careless ease, nodded vigorously.

"Oh, you mustn't sell that car!" he answered with a gasp.

"You see, Mr. Thurston," John laughed. "Your son pleads for me. As for my accomplishments, well, I've a degree of sorts, won against the run of the game, I admit. I can also ask for my supper in French. . . ."

Mr. Thurston had been watching the boy, and he seemed satisfied. He twisted himself from his chair and limped across to Melrose.

"I don't give a damn about French or book learning," he grumbled. "What I want is some one with common sense. You can have the job on the understanding that you take entire responsibility for the boy."

"That is very good of you, but . . ."

"There are no buts. I want him off my hands—entirely. Is that understood?"

"Of course. . . ."

"Then you start at once. Paul, Mr. Melrose will be your tutor until you go back to school in the autumn. You will do exactly as he tells you, is that clear?"

"Yes, father."

"That is settled then, Mr. Melrose. If you will come to my study after dinner we will settle details. And now, if you will excuse me. . . ."

With a curt nod and a last questioning look at his son he stumped from the room.

There was silence when the door closed behind him, and then Melrose, who had risen, sank back into his chair.

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"Sudden but satisfactory," he breathed, and looked up to find Marcia watching him.

"Very prettily acted," she said. "So you save your car, Mr. Melrose?"

Something in the quality of her comment put him on his guard and prompted him to watch her closely as he answered.

"And perhaps I save Paul too?"

Her glance did not waver. It was as guileless and serene as his own, and he was almost ready to swear that his sudden suspicion was unfounded.

"You can but try," she replied, "but I am afraid you will find Paul a difficult charge. So . . . so elusive."

She pushed back her chair and walked from the room, leaving him to gaze after her thoughtfully and to wonder whether he had heard her correctly.

CHAPTER 3 : NEWS OF AN INQUISITIVE FRENCHMAN

HE was still thoughtful when the time came to change for dinner.

Paul had proved an entertaining host. Together they had visited the gardens, the greenhouses, the garages, and most particularly the stables. Paul had pointed out his favourite tree for climbing, his favourite hiding-place, making Melrose free of his secrets, and leading him from point to point with the courteous eagerness of a prince eager to display the graces of his kingdom. It was plain that he was happy and had no idea of the sword hanging over his head, and although he must often have been lonely with no one of his own age to talk to, he had none of the sullenness which loneliness so often brings.

At the stables he insisted on taking his horse from his stall and parading him round the yard so that Melrose could admire him, and then he pointed to a fine bay mare which Melrose could use if he would ride with him next morning before breakfast. A promise was readily given, and they were leaving the stables when they were passed by a groom leading a fine black gelding, whose magnificent poise and proud bearing made Melrose exclaim with delight.

"That is Marcia's horse," Paul volunteered. "She won't let any one else ride him. Says he's unsafe."

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"Well, he certainly looks lively," Melrose answered. "Your sister likes to pick them rough : Cars, aeroplanes, and now this astonishing animal. Think my bay could give him a run ? "

"Not a chance. Rupert's the fastest horse I know..."

Melrose listened intently to Paul's stories about his sister. It was obvious that he admired her as one admires a goddess, but he feared her too. Her slightest wish was his law, and though she must often treat him with contempt, he would no doubt go through fire and torment to win a word of praise. One day when he was grown up he was going to surpass even her achievements, that had been his dream for years, and Melrose's triumph over her in the car had given him new hope of its realization. What one man could do, so could another.

Of his father he spoke little, and Melrose guessed that he resented the little man's fussy attentions, and did not understand his overwhelming affection.

Neither, thought Melrose, did he. Although coming from different strains, brother and sister were very much alike, and neither of them resembled their father in the very least.

Melrose finished dressing for dinner and went into the adjoining room, which was Paul's, to see whether he was ready. The boy was still struggling with a tie that would keep slipping from under his stiff collar, and as there was no hurry Melrose gave him a word of encouragement and walked over to the window.

Both his room and Paul's faced the drive. The open country stretched away to the skyline with scarcely a hill or a tree to break the monotony. It was depres-

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sing to any one who liked more variety in his scenery, but Melrose was not at the moment concerned with the artistic value of the view. What interested him was that there was no cover behind which a man might approach the house. Even more satisfactory was the broad belt of loose gravel which enclosed the whole of their side of the building : a man would have to walk like a cat to avoid betraying his presence even when darkness hid him from sight.

He leaned out of the window and examined the wall. There was no possible means whereby a man could climb. No convenient drain-pipe, no handholds of any kind on the smooth plaster-covered wall, and the windows were too far apart for their sills to form a ladder.

Satisfied that no attempt would be made from that direction, and that he could sleep well at night, he drew in his head. If danger threatened after the boy was in bed it could only come from inside, and he began to wonder whether it was wise to keep the boy ignorant of the facts. He was not the sort of lad to break down or see a ghost in every shadow if he were told—but perhaps his father had a reason, and it would be better to wait until after he had seen him before telling Paul the truth.

Dinner was an uncomfortable meal. They found Mr. Thurston and Marcia waiting when they went downstairs ; with them was a burly, fresh-faced man of about thirty, whom Mr. Thurston introduced as Bob Anderson, his secretary.

Melrose liked him at once. He was a judge of men, and it was quite inconceivable that this clear-eyed

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man, who looked more like a rugger forward than a secretary, could have any part in a kidnapping plot. His smile was friendly ; Paul was obviously fond of him, and as the meal progressed Melrose more than once found the man looking at him meditatively as if he were trying to gauge the strength of his muscles and the quickness of his brain.

Mr. Thurston made no attempt to play the host, and Marcia too was silent and preoccupied. This was the first time that Melrose had seen her dressed like a girl, and though she paid him no attention, being content to address her few remarks to Anderson, he could scarcely attend to his food. Her beauty was electric ; it startled his nerves and made him conscious of her by a sixth sense, which till then he did not know he possessed. "Put me in a dark room, and let her come towards me over a velvet pile carpet, and I would know she was there," he thought, as he answered some question of Paul's. "She's proud, and I would like to humble her ; she is hard, but I believe she could be soft and a woman, she hates——" His thoughts gave a sudden kick and he looked at her over the rim of his wine glass. Was that her secret ? Was that why her mouth looked cruel and she behaved so outrageously ?

The meal came to an end, and Bob Anderson laid his hand on Paul's shoulder.

"I've work to do upstairs," he said to Melrose. "Let me take this youngster off your hands for a while. He can type a letter for me before he goes to bed. What do you say, Paul ? "

"I'd love to," Paul answered eagerly.

The eyes of the two men met over his head. Ander-

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son was plainly proposing an alliance while acknowledging Melrose's right to refuse. In the background Mr. Thurston looked as if he would like to protest, while Marcia was regarding them with mocking curiosity.

Melrose returned Anderson's smile and gave his consent.

"Go ahead," he answered with just sufficient emphasis to show that he appreciated the other's action. "I'll be up later for a chat, if I may?"

"Sure thing," Anderson nodded, and with his hand still on Paul's shoulder he steered him from the room.

Melrose followed his host to his study, a room that was more like an office than a room in a country house where a man takes his ease. Mr. Thurston pointed with his stick to a chair, and when he was seated he came at once to the point.

"Your father warned you what to expect, Mr. Melrose?" he asked curtly.

"He did, Mr. Thurston, and he also told me that I owe you his life and, incidentally, my own. If I can help you . . ."

Thurston waved aside his gratitude impatiently.

"You understand that the boy is in danger? You must be with him night and day, night and day," he muttered.

"I shall do my best, but you are not suggesting that your secretary, Mr. Anderson, is not to be trusted?"

"I trust no one," Mr. Thurston answered petulantly, "no one."

"Do you mind if I ask a few questions, Mr. Thurston? So far I have nothing to go on, but I

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have an idea from something my father said that this is not an ordinary threat by a gang. Could I see one of those anonymous letters ? ”

Mr. Thurston unlocked a drawer of his desk and handed over several sheets of paper. The writing on all of them was in block capitals, and the message the same :

“ YOU LOVE YOUR SON. YOU WILL LOSE HIM BEFORE HE GOES BACK TO SCHOOL. YOU KNOW WHY.”

The paper, Melrose noticed, was good quality linen of a kind which he himself might use.

“ Thank you,” he said, handing them back, “ and now will you explain the last sentence ? ”

Mr. Thurston seemed to shrink into his chair, and he glanced nervously round the room as if he were afraid that every shadow concealed an accuser.

“ My father,” he said, with a nervous twitch of his lips, “ made his money in America. Money was more to him than people, a family was ruined, and I heard what had happened before I was sent to school in England. I couldn’t forget the man’s face when he told me. . . . He threatened that he would get even with us. Then my father died, and I went back to America. Money was in my blood. I was out to corner a certain market, an . . . an illicit market in those days, and I found one man against me. A man I only knew by repute. One of us had to fail—I didn’t. I became rich, and then that man came to see me. He told me his name : he was the son of the man my father had ruined.”

He bowed his head, and Melrose, looking at his

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abject figure, found it hard to pity him. It was obvious why the police had not been called in, and why Thurston went in terror for his son's life. Not the father but the son was to be pitied, and remembering the child's eager face and delightful ways, he turned again to his questions.

"What is that man's name?" he asked.

"Strauss—but he will not call himself that now."

"Have you seen him recently?"

"He asked me to call on him in London, a month ago. He told me then what he would do. He said no one, not even the police, could stop him. . . ."

"Will you describe him?"

"A tall man about my own age—no, younger, about forty. He is a blonde, blue eyes, gold hair, very proud of his looks. He is strong, stronger than you I should say, though not so fit, for his muscles are turning to fat, and he dresses elegantly, always in pale-coloured suits. I can't describe him any better."

"That will do to go on with; and now, do you suspect any one in the house? What about the servants?"

"I suspect every one, every one!"

"Surely not your daughter?" Melrose asked, and was staggered by the passion of bitter anger which he aroused.

"Marcia hates me!" Thurston shouted, losing all control. "She killed her mother when she was born, and she has plagued me ever since. She is jealous of Paul because I love him . . ."

"I see," Melrose answered, cutting short his outburst. "What about Paul's mother?"

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"She has left me. She doesn't concern you."

Melrose got up.

"I need not trouble you any more, Mr. Thurston," he said quietly. "Your servants must understand that I am Paul's tutor. I will stay with him until he goes back to school, and then I will go after this man Strauss. In the meantime I will take Mr. Anderson into my confidence."

"No!"

"I am afraid it will be necessary. He can deal with the servants. He can help me to watch over Paul, and if there is to be any rough work he will be invaluable. With your permission I will go to him now."

Mr. Thurston raised a hand in protest, and then let it fall helplessly. A glance at Melrose showed him that protest would be useless, and he muttered his consent before turning his back in dismissal.

"And that," thought Melrose, "is that. Now for a council of war with Bob Anderson. I shall sleep better with him as an ally."

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The task of keeping ward over a boy of fourteen proved more congenial than Melrose had dared to hope. The boy himself was eager for companionship, and very quick to learn the ways of manhood, while the holiday ban on schoolbooks left the way clear for instruction of another and pleasanter kind. Each day they rode before breakfast, sometimes with Marcia to make a third, and to keep their wits and muscles taut, but more often by themselves.

The mornings were filled with excursions in the car or more lazy adventures across the fields, which usually

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meant that Melrose found a shady corner under a tree, and sat down with Paul beside him to tell stories of men and of their work in the far-off places of the earth.

Paul, propped on an elbow, would listen breathlessly, and never grew tired of storing his mind with these marvels. Melrose became his hero, to be worshipped with the mastering devotion which only a boy can give, and he was never happier than when he was gazing into the lazy blue eyes, and listening to the spell of the quiet voice of this man who seemed to know everything.

Sometimes, when Bob Anderson could get away, they would all, including Marcia, go for a day's sailing on the Broads, only to return in the evening with eyes clouded by the wind and bodies weary with the unaccustomed exercise. Then Melrose would drive them home in the Bentley, while Paul watched the instrument board and called for speed, and Marcia sat withdrawn into her corner and watched them both with a queer expression in her eyes.

Bob Anderson took charge of Paul during most afternoons. The two of them disappeared until tea, when Paul would return with shining eyes and Anderson would smile reassuringly at Melrose. He knew they had been flying with Marcia, but he trusted Anderson. Marcia never asked him to go up. He supposed that she had not forgiven him for his criticisms, but so long as she remembered and obeyed them when Paul was with her he did not mind.

In the evenings while Anderson worked in his room and kept one eye on the sleeping Paul, Melrose used to escape to the inn outside the grounds and enjoy

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a quiet game of darts and a drink with Price. Some excuse was always to be found to take Price on one side and ask him for news.

For a fortnight the answer was always the same. There was no suspicious gossip, no loitering strangers, nothing to disturb the serenity of their surroundings. Melrose was beginning to think that the kidnappers had found the proposition a little too stiff—unless the whole thing had after all been only a hoax.

And then on the fifteenth evening he pushed open the door of the inn, and the moment he saw Price he knew that something had happened.

"We're off!" he thought gleefully as he made his way to the bar amid a chorus of good-evenings and welcoming smiles. He ordered some beer and stood idly chatting. A farmer invited him to play darts, but with a laughing plea that his eye was out, he refused, and sauntered instead to the table where Price was sitting, a tankard of ale at his elbow and the remains of two handsome chops on his plate.

"And how is our Mr. Price this evening?" he asked genially.

"Pretty comfortable, thank you, Mr. Melrose, sir," Price answered respectfully in his character of small town shopkeeper enjoying a quiet rest from his labours. "I trust that you and the folk at Hammer Lodge are the same?"

An amused gleam lighted Melrose's blue eyes. Price was an artist, and if either of them gave the show away it would not be his servant.

"They're fine and I'm fine," he said. "How about another drink? Same again?" He gathered up

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Price's tankard, and was moving away when Price stopped him with a deprecatory gesture.

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Melrose, but I was thinking that a walk might do me good. It is rather close in here, don't you think?"

"Well, a drink first and then I'll walk with you if I may?"

The two men moved up to the bar, where Melrose called for the drinks and chaffed the landlord about the toughness of his chops.

"Mr. Price needs air," he laughed, as he downed his drink. "I am taking him for a brisk constitutional. When the pain's gone we'll be back for another drink." And, to the accompaniment of good-humoured banter, they passed out into the road.

They walked in leisurely fashion past a garage with a solitary pump, and only when Melrose was sure that they could not be overheard did he turn an inquiring eye on his companion.

"Out with it," he said. "You've got some news for me."

"Well, sir, it doesn't sound much," Price answered, "but it may turn out important. This afternoon about half-past one I was standing outside the inn wondering which way to go when a car draws up at that petrol-pump we just passed."

"What sort of car?"

"Big saloon, sir, with one of those basket-work bodies, black and yellow. The driver orders the garage man to fill her up and then walks back to the inn. As he passed me I saw he was foreign looking...."

"Not American, by any chance?"

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"More like an Italian, sir, though now you mention it, he did speak English uncommon well for a foreigner."

"Well, go on with your yarn."

"As I was saying, he goes into the bar and I didn't give him much thought as I supposed he was only going to have a drink while he was waiting, and then I heard Tom, that's the landlord as you know, say something about Hammer Lodge."

"This grows interesting. What was that something, Price?"

"There you've got me, sir ; I couldn't rightly hear, being too far away, but I turns to investigate. The doors were all open, it being a hot afternoon, and my rubbers made no sound on the stone floor, so I slips along the corridor and takes a look through the door. There was the foreigner, a long chap with black hair all plastered down, with his back to me talking to Tom. His voice was soft, and I could hear Tom's answers better than his questions."

Price paused impressively, and then with an instinctive look round to make sure that they were still alone he lowered his voice.

"Tom was telling him about the people at Hammer Lodge, sir, and the man seemed very interested, especially when Tom mentioned you."

"Mentioned me ! I wonder why he did that ? "

"I fancy that the man said he had been here before, sir, and wanted to know if there had been any changes. I heard him ask about Miss Thurston and Master Paul, and then Tom told him that there was a new tutor."

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"What did he say to that?"

"He laughed and asked Tom to describe you. He listened carefully, especially when Tom told him Master Paul was so fond of you that he never left your side if he could help it."

Melrose drew thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"How did our friend react to that flattering picture?"

"He seemed a bit nettled, sir, but then he laughed again, and this time I heard what he said."

"Yes?"

"He said: 'I must have a look at this paragon. Mr. Thurston's an old friend of mine, and I must try and find time for a call in the next few days.'"

"The next few days? Do you suppose that was a promise or a threat, Price?"

"It sounded more like a threat to me, sir, the way he said it. Unpleasant laugh he had, soft like his voice but . . . nasty."

"Did you hear any more?"

"There wasn't no more, sir. Just the sound of a shilling tossed on the counter and time for me to slip back to the door, then he comes down the passage. I let him go a few steps and then I followed. You see, sir, I wanted to see the front of that car."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, it looked foreign and it was—Delage."

"But registered in this country?"

"No, sir, the numbers were the wrong kind—it carried a plate with an "F" and the steering wheel was on the wrong side."

"A Delage, basket-work body, F. plate, wheel on

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the near side? It sounds as if that car were more at home in France than in England, Price?"

"Yes, sir, and come to think of it, the driver might have been French; he was not English or American, that I'm prepared to swear."

Melrose smoked thoughtfully for a while and then threw his cigarette away.

"You mentioned no passenger, so I suppose the man was alone?"

"He was, sir."

"Then it comes to this, a man we don't like and whom we suspect of being a Frenchman shows an undue interest in the people at Hammer Lodge. He has an unpleasant laugh which grows even more unpleasant when he hears that Paul is tied to my shoe laces, and he announces quite openly that he will probably return within the next few days. Is that right?"

"Those are the facts, sir."

"Well, it's possible that he is what he says he is, a friend of Mr. Thurston's, but somehow I doubt it—one doesn't usually confide in landlords unless one wants to get something out of them. That being so we will rank him among the rogues to be dealt with when the time comes and, thanks to your warning, we are prepared for him."

Melrose paused to look up at the sky and apparently to count the stars, but his brain was working fast, and when he turned his attention once more to his companion his orders were clear and concise.

"In a few moments I am going back to warn Mr. Anderson that the enemy have taken the field. Any

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orders he may give you are to be taken as coming from me—is that clear ? ”

“ Perfectly, sir.”

“ Good. Now your job is to tackle Tom without arousing his suspicions. Find out all you can about our Frenchman. Let me know at once if you see him again and, if you get the chance, find out what he is up to, but keep in the background. Send any information you get either to me or to Mr. Anderson—to no one else.”

“ That is understood, sir.”

“ Until we have some idea how they will strike that is all we can do. It looks as if a fast car and a quick get-away is the line, but they’ll have to think up something better than that. Here’s where I leave you. Say good-night to the boys and treat them to a round of drinks on me. Good luck ! ”

“ Good luck, sir. You can count on me.”

“ Don’t I know it, you old warrior ! ” Melrose laughed and turned in the direction of Hammer Lodge.

His step was light and his shoulders swayed rhythmically as he walked up the long drive. Price’s news was the wine he had needed, and the thought of coming action stirred his blood and sent a song to his lips.

As he approached the house he looked up at Anderson’s lighted window and chuckled. There, playing the faithful guardian, was another whose eyes would brighten when he heard about the inquisitive Frenchman. A brawny fist would clench into a knot —two fighting men would be on their guard to save a child from the talons of the vulture.

“ En avant, mon ami ! ” he encouraged himself as

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he leapt up the steps. "Into the breach, my friend, for to-morrow some one . . ."

He stopped abruptly and the words died in his throat.

A cigarette glowed in front of him under the dark shadow of the porch. Some one was barring the way and he knew with dazed certainty even before a word was spoken that it was Price's Frenchman.

CHAPTER 4 : SHE WITHDREW HER ARM

THE cigarette moved in a small arc as the man removed it from his lips and then stabbed it with an airy gesture towards him. A low, amused laugh—nasty, Price would have called it—made him clench his hands and then a figure came out of the shadows to meet him.

" You must be Mr. Melrose, yes ? " the man asked with mocking politeness. " The charming Miss Thurston she tell me so much about you that I ask all the evening where you are so that I can compliment you."

" Well, now's your chance," Melrose told him. He had himself in hand, and he sounded faintly bored. " You are a friend of Miss Thurston's ? "

" Of the family, I assure you, my dear Mr. Melrose. They are all so delightful and I have lost my heart to the little Paul."

" I'm a bit that way myself," Melrose replied easily, as he put a cigarette to his lips and searched his pockets for matches. " Are you staying long ? "

A match flared and Melrose saw a hawk nose and black piercing eyes. The full lips were drawn back in a sneering smile. It was the face of a young man, a young libertine whose cheeks sagged over a cruel mouth. He was in evening dress, and his black hair

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was brushed back from a high, narrow forehead and glistened with hair oil. There was a nauseating scent of heliotrope.

Melrose flicked the match away with a faint whirring sound on to the gravel.

"I pay what you call a flying visit," the man answered. "And now, if you will excuse me, I find my car."

"And I, if you will permit me, will accompany you," Melrose answered. "After all the pretty things you have said about me that's the least I can do."

For a fraction of a second the man hesitated, and then he laughed.

"I shall be honoured, monsieur," he murmured.

They walked down the steps and round a corner of the house. There, in deep shadow and out of sight of any chance visitors to the house, was the basket-work saloon which Price had seen ; but if Melrose thought it odd that a friend of the family should act so strangely he did not say so.

The Frenchman started up his engine and leaned out of the window for a final word.

"Some day I see you again, Mr. Melrose, and we have a longer talk, yes ? "

"Oh, undoubtedly yes," Melrose answered. "I have a feeling we ought to see more of each other."

"That is good. I, too, shall be charmed—when the little Paul needs you no longer. Who knows, perhaps that will be soon ? "

The man's unpleasant laugh grated in his ears as the car slid away from him. It travelled swiftly towards the broad sweep of drive, and not until it was fifty

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yards away and it was impossible for him to read the number were the lights switched on.

Melrose stared thoughtfully down the drive for some minutes after the car was gone. The cigarette burnt down to his fingers, and he pitched it away before turning to walk slowly back to the house.

The puzzle was too deep to be solved without further knowledge. Here was a Frenchman who was apparently known to the family—that statement was too easily checked for him to have lied—and who showed himself to that family and yet who took extraordinary pains to conceal the identity of his car.

"It beats me," Melrose muttered. That he was somehow connected with the proposed kidnapping he was sure, but why come openly to the house unless . . . the accomplice ! What a blind fool he had been.

For the second time that evening Melrose took the steps with a rush. His face was set and the winter was in his eyes as he opened the door and walked into the hall to find Marcia talking to her father at the foot of the stairs.

The lighting of the hall was subdued, but it caught the white of her dress and her pale face as she leaned towards her father and talked in an imperious undertone. He was evidently angry.

As the door closed and Melrose walked towards them the girl looked up with a startled expression which immediately froze to cold immobility as she recognized him. With a slight tilt of her head she managed to convey that he was intruding, but that was not unusual, and with a final good-night to her father she turned her back and began to climb the stairs.

SHE WITHDREW HER ARM

Melrose strode forward.

"One moment, if you please, Miss Thurston," he called abruptly. "There are one or two questions I would like to ask you."

She stopped with her hand on the banister and he heard the rustle of her gown as she turned towards him. Her face was in shadow, but he knew the dark contempt that was staring at him from her eyes.

"What right have you to question me?"

"Every right," he answered with equal coldness. "Will you tell me who was the man I met on the steps a few minutes ago?—Perhaps your father will be good enough to tell me," he added as she did not answer.

"An infernal scoundrel!" Mr. Thurston exploded.
"An impudent . . ."

"He is my cousin," the girl cut in with cold anger.
"Is there anything else you wish to know, Mr. Melrose?"

"Yes, there is. How long was he here? Why did he come? And whom did he speak to?"

The questions dropped with icy distinctness and silenced even the mutterings of Mr. Thurston, who appeared to be nursing a grievance of his own. Melrose heard a gasp as the girl drew in a quick breath and then she flashed down the stairs to stand before him. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright with indignation, and he saw that the knuckles were white over her clenched fingers.

"Your questions are an insult and your presence an impertinence!" she stormed.

"Unfortunately both are necessary," Melrose answered dryly. "But perhaps I was rather too blunt.

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Won't you pretend I am merely curious and answer my questions? "

" I will not ! "

Melrose sighed and turned to Mr. Thurston.

" Then I am afraid I shall have to ring up the police and tell them about our little secret. . . ."

" Are you mad ! " the girl breathed.

" Not yet," he smiled, " but you see I rather agree with your father when he says that your cousin is a scoundrel. Somehow I . . . er . . . don't feel quite safe while he is around. . . ."

" But that is absurd ! "

" Is it ? " he asked steadily. " Then perhaps you can reassure me ? "

The girl hesitated and her glance fell away from his ; then she looked up and he saw that her eyes were full of wicked mockery.

" I should hate you to be unnecessarily alarmed, Mr. Melrose," she said softly. " My cousin is quite harmless. At least, I think so ! "

" Why did he come ? "

" To talk to us. He wanted to know when we were going to visit him. I was trying to persuade my father to fix a day when you came in."

" I won't go near the place ! " Mr. Thurston cried, but Melrose took no notice of him ; he was watching the girl.

" And how long did he stay ? "

" An hour—perhaps less."

" Did he see any one besides Mr. Thurston and yourself ? I mean, did he make any excuses to leave you so that he could speak to any one alone ? "

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"Alone?"

The girl was puzzled. A faint frown etched her smooth forehead and then she gave a slight start.

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

"I wish I knew the reason for these questions."

"Never mind the reason," he replied urgently. "You will know later—only tell me which of the servants . . ."

"It wasn't a servant, unless you call Mr. Anderson a servant!"

"Anderson!"

A shock like a douche of icy water made him gasp, and his face was bleak with horror. All these days he had trusted Paul's safety to this man. He had walked secure in the knowledge of his honesty. Time and again he had talked over with him ways and means for outwitting the vultures, and now . . .

"Are you sure?" he asked desperately.

"Of course I'm sure. Pierre asked if he might see Paul, and I took him up myself. Mr. Anderson heard us and came from his room. He invited Pierre to have a drink, and I left them."

"How . . . how long was it before he came down?"

"Ten minutes—a quarter of an hour. I couldn't say exactly."

Melrose felt as if an intolerable weight were pressing on his shoulders. The narrowness of his escape brought beads of perspiration to his temples, and he turned away heavily.

"Thank you, Miss Thurston," he muttered, and climbed the stairs. He knew that Marcia and her father were staring at him, and that he owed them an

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explanation, but he was incapable of putting his thoughts into words. For the moment he must watch Paul, and not let Anderson suspect. To-morrow some different arrangement must be made—Anderson would have to go.

He entered his bedroom, and went through into Paul's room and switched on the heavily-shaded bed-lamp. The boy was sleeping peacefully. He turned out the light and looked towards Anderson's room. For the first time since his arrival the light was out before eleven. On other nights they had always had a few words and a last drink before turning in. Why not to-night? Melrose guessed the answer and was turning away when Anderson called out :

" Hallo, that you, Melrose ? "

" Yes."

" Kid's all right, isn't he ? "

" Yes."

" What's the matter with you? You sound hipped ! "

" I am, as you call it, hipped ! "

" Well, sleep it off, old son. See you in the morning."

Melrose returned to his room without answering. He resisted a murderous impulse to brain the man where he lay, and when at last he slept it was the uneasy sleep that starts awake for no reason a hundred times in a night.

Paul's cheery voice brought Melrose from the bed to his feet in one bound the next morning, and he grinned half-heartedly at the boy's laughter as his heart resumed its normal beat.

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"I frightened you! I frightened the great Mr. Melrose!" Paul shouted delightedly.

"I guess I was having a nightmare," John answered, and went across to the window, where he drew great gulps of fresh air into his lungs.

The morning was clear and bright. Rain before dawn had sweetened the air and freshened the trees, it still sparkled on the grass when the two of them let their horses go in a hand gallop across the fields.

Paul was in high humour, and for very shame Melrose joined in his laughter, but he was glad that Anderson had finished his breakfast before they came back for theirs.

After breakfast he carried Paul away with him in his car. It was his intention to keep him away from the house for the whole day while he thrashed out his problem, and decided what was best to be done. But Paul had other plans. He must be back for lunch, he pleaded. Marcia had promised . . . but then he blushed, and though his dark eyes glowed with excitement he would say no more.

Melrose listened to the eager voice and allowed himself to be persuaded. He had no intention of allowing the boy out of his sight for one moment of the day, and he promised himself that before evening he would see the last of Anderson. If that was not possible he would move Paul's bed into his own room, and they would sleep behind locked doors. Not for all the money in the world would he pass another night like the last.

Easier in his mind now that the decision was made,

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Melrose sent the Bentley flying for home, and they arrived in time to join the others for lunch.

The atmosphere was strained and oppressive. Anderson smiled at him and talked to Paul, but the rest of them ate their food in silence. Melrose knew that he was causing the tension, but he did not care. The food almost choked him when he heard Anderson talking so serenely to the boy, and he welcomed the distraction when the butler whispered over his shoulder that he was wanted on the telephone.

There were a number of extensions in the house, but the call had been put through into Mr. Thurston's study, and he went there at once, purposely leaving the door open so that he could see whether any one came out of the dining-room, which was directly opposite across the hall.

He guessed that the call might be from Price, and it was.

"Is that Mr. Melrose?" his servant asked for the second time.

"Speaking! What is it, Price?"

"Ah, it is you, sir," the man answered. "I didn't recognize your voice the first time, and I had to be sure."

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"I saw our man again last night, sir, coming from your place, and I reckoned you'd run into him."

"I did. Was that all you wanted to tell me?"

"No, sir. Seeing him so late at night and thinking he would want to come back if he's what we think he is, I thought perhaps he'd be staying somewhere near, and he is, sir—at Norwich!"

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"How the devil did you find that out?"

"Tom dropped a hint, sir, so I borrowed a bicycle, and here I am, at the Maid's Head."

"Well, I'm damned, and is he there?"

"I've been sitting at the next table to him in the dining-room, sir, and—he was not alone!"

The news quickened Melrose's interest, and he asked eagerly :

"What sort of a bird was with him?"

"A big blond chap, sir, looked like a German, but spoke American."

Strauss! There could be no doubt about it, and the knowledge that the vultures were hovering so close at hand steadied his nerve and brought a fighting gleam to his eye. The laugh which followed his first involuntary exclamation was full of the lilt of battle.

"Thank you, Price," he said dreamily, "that is all I need to know. I've found out something myself, and I want you here as fast as you can. . . ."

"Excuse me, one moment, sir, I think you ought to know what I overheard."

"Well?"

"The Frenchman said, 'this afternoon,' and pointed to a place on the map they'd got spread out between them—just as if they were planning a run in the car, sir!"

"This afternoon? Then the faster you get here the better. Ask to see me—no one else; is that plain?"

"Countermanding yesterday's order, sir?"

"Definitely—that is the something I have found out. If I am not here find the Bentley or Miss Thurston's

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Lagonda, whichever is in the garage, and see that it is O.K. There's a house telephone behind the door. I'll call if I want you. Keep out of sight as much as possible, but don't let any one get rid of you. Got all that?"

"Every word, sir!"

"Then start now."

Melrose put down the receiver. All the time he was speaking his eyes had been fixed on the dining-room door, and he had kept his voice low. One thing was sure, Anderson knew nothing about the warning he had received, and he had to take the risk that some other accomplice had tapped the wire. The risk he decided was a small one, and he sat for a few moments where he was while he decided on his plan of action. The simple thing would be to disregard Mr. Thurston's wishes, and ring for the police, but what could he tell them when they came? The kidnapper would sheer off, the police would offer protection, and the whole business would start again at a later date. Paul's future happiness must be secured. To do that he must risk playing the hand alone, and Paul must be the decoy that would bring the vultures swooping down to their own destruction. It was tough on the lad, but—Paul's ringing laugh came to him as the dining-room door was opened by the butler, and he smiled when he heard it. He knew then that Paul himself would be the first one to accept the challenge, and the knowledge was a tonic, clearing his eye of all doubt, and sending him back into the room with his nerves strung to concert pitch.

The first thing he heard as he strolled back to his

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place was Paul's excited voice reminding his sister of her promise.

"What is this promise?" John asked with a smile. "You two have been a couple of conspirators recently."

"You'll soon know, John," Paul answered. "Please don't ask Marcia to tell now."

John turned inquiring eyes on the girl.

"It's just a simple trick all pilots ought to know," she replied. "Paul makes such a fuss about things."

"When's the show come off?" Melrose asked. "I'd like to be in at the death."

"This afternoon. Mr. Anderson has promised to come with us, so you need not be alarmed."

"Why should I be alarmed? I'm merely curious."

"Curiosity and preaching seem to be your worst faults, Mr. Melrose. When can you be ready, Bob?" she asked pointedly.

"As soon as you like. I'm free all afternoon," Anderson answered, and John could detect no hint of triumph in his level gaze.

"Then, shall we say in half an hour?"

Anderson nodded, but Melrose had other ideas, and he voiced them with smiling serenity.

"Suppose you take me with you instead, Miss Thurston? You know I have only seen you in action from the ground."

The girl frowned and tapped her foot on the floor under the table, but he pretended not to notice her annoyance and turned to Paul.

"Wouldn't you like to show me your trick?" he asked.

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"Yes, but . . ."—the boy's glance wavered between him and Marcia ; he saw her warning frown.

"But what ? "

"Well, I wanted to make sure I could do it first, you see. . . ."

"If that's all that is troubling you, I'll take the risk," John laughed. "You said—half an hour, Miss Thurston ? "

For a moment he thought the girl would strike him. Her cheeks flamed, and he was sure that she was going to refuse. Then, most surprisingly, her anger died, and she considered him calmly.

"When will you learn that I like my own way ? " she asked.

Melrose seemed to give the question some thought, and then he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"When you prove that your way is better than mine," he answered.

The girl stared at him coolly, and the faint, mocking smile, which he was beginning to know so well, touched her lips. Both of them had risen to their feet, and they stood facing each other, she, with head thrown back and proud eyes cold and disdainful under her arched brows ; he, leaning negligently with his arm over his chair and thinking, even in that moment of tension, how lovely she looked and how startled she would be if he obeyed his instinct and kissed her lips.

"I always accept a challenge, Mr. Melrose," she said at last, "and I think it is time you were taught a lesson."

She swept out of the room, and Melrose was the

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only one who did not turn to see her go through the door.

Anderson and her father followed, but still he did not move.

A hand pulled at his sleeve, and he looked down to see Paul's grave young eyes staring at him.

"I am afraid she is very angry with you," he said solemnly.

"Angry?" John answered, and his smile was so dazzling that the boy blinked in wonder. "Would you say that lightning was angry when it destroyed you, my Paul?"

"It . . . it never has. . . ."

"But some day it will—you mark my words," John answered wisely, for he had just made a discovery that compelled him to prophecy.

Price had not arrived by the time they set off for the flying field, but that couldn't be helped. Melrose bullied Mr. Thurston into promising that Anderson would be kept working under his supervision until their return, and although he had no great faith in Mr. Thurston, he put the fear of God into him by threatening instant disclosure if he learnt that Anderson had left the house during his absence.

There was no time for further precautions before Marcia appeared at the wheel of her Lagonda and summoned him imperiously with her horn.

Paul crouched between them during the short drive to the flying field ; he was so plainly miserable because of the tension which he could not understand that Melrose made great efforts to cheer him up, and he

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succeeded so well that by the time they had drawn the aeroplane from its hangar and had seen to the unfolding of the wings, he was chattering gaily. Proud of his knowledge, he drew Melrose with him to a closer inspection of the machine, and Melrose, to whom all aeroplanes were a joy, followed him gladly.

A first glance showed him that the aeroplane was a type of which he had heard, but not flown : a low wing monoplane with unusual lines, and seating capacity for three, two side by side in front, and a third in a cockpit to himself behind. When he pointed out this odd arrangement to Marcia, she told him curtly that when she carried a servant she preferred not to have him beside her.

"And to-day I am the servant ?" John asked.

"Obviously," she retorted.

He made no protest, but returned to his examination of the plane. Small wind shields were all the cover provided, but with his knowledge of the girl, that did not surprise him. What did astonish him was the three parachutes, one on each seat so arranged as to act as not very comfortable cushions. When he asked Paul whether they always used these things and was told that they did, he turned once again to the girl.

"This is the most sensible thing I have heard about you yet," he told her.

"Oh yes !" she answered. "Then would you mind getting into yours now ? I'm waiting to start."

She swung the propeller as she said it, and when she was satisfied that the engine was running sweetly she removed the chocks from the wheels and climbed into her seat. Paul was already aboard, and it was he who

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in a clear important voice had announced contact, and then controlled the throttle as to the manner born.

John standing up in his narrow cockpit, his hair ruffled by the wind from the idling propeller, supervised the fastening of the boy's parachute and his safety belt, and then sat down to attend to his own.

He was not sure that he was going to enjoy being flown by Marcia, but it was too late to back out now. She glanced over her shoulder, and he gave a cheerful wave to show that he was ready—that she chose to read the wave as the salute of one who was afraid he was about to die was not his fault.

He saw her look up casually at the sock to gauge the wind, and then they were taxi-ing up the field ready to wheel into position for the take off.

The moment when the wheels leave the ground is always a moment of suspense, and John shifted on his parachute cushion so that he could look more easily over the side. He grinned when he saw that they were going to clear the hedge a good thirty feet higher than she thought necessary when she was alone, and he settled down to enjoy himself. The girl could fly like an angel, there was no question about that, and whenever there was an awkward movement he soon learnt that it was because Paul's hand was on the control. With a deft flick she would recover poise, and the lad would turn round with an excited face and yell something which he could not catch because of the wind. But he had no need to hear. He knew that the boy was happy, and when he saw Marcia lean across to him and say something in his ear, he saw the boy's eager nod, and knew that the trick was about to begin.

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Instinctively he looked over the side to judge their height, and frowned a little when he saw that they were barely a thousand feet up.

Even an experienced pilot takes as much head room as he can get before he fools around, and he looked anxiously at Marcia. Her serene profile reassured him ; she was leaning back and he could see one gloved hand resting easily on the stick with the same careless confidence that it rested on the wheel of her car. Even so he was tempted to lean forward and tap her arm to warn her to fly higher ; but the knowledge that she would only shrug her shoulders made him look over the side instead.

Beneath them was an unending succession of fields, crossed by a few roads and broken in the distance by still sheets of water which he knew to be the Broads. To their right he could see Hammer Lodge, and he had a moment of grim amusement when he thought of Anderson doing homework with the old man. To their left front, some three miles away, he reckoned, was the wood behind which he had first heard the aeroplane, and there beside it was the patch of green which was their landing-field.

Marcia seemed to be heading home with her engine at half-throttle, and as he looked up he saw her glance over the side and then bend down to speak to Paul. The boy nodded and turned to wave to him, and even as he waved back Marcia opened the throttle and tilted the nose of the machine down in a flat dive.

Over her shoulder he could see the needle of the air-speed indicator begin to twist across the dial, the wind screamed over the wings and through his hair, blowing

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out his cheeks if he opened his lips, tearing at the sleeves of his coat, and doing its icy best to rip his hands away from the sides of the cockpit. Through a mist of tears he saw Marcia's grey helmeted head peer for a second over the side, and he saw the boy fumble with his buttons, then the intolerable roar of the engine died to a spluttering cough, and he found himself gazing at the wheeling sky.

They were climbing, rushing up into the sunlight with the surging momentum of their gathered speed. Up and up like a rocketing pheasant that has been mortally wounded, and then, as the noise of the wind grew less, they began slowly to turn over on their backs, so that the wheels were above them and their heads were hanging over the earth.

Too slowly ! He felt the strain of his safety belt tightening round his waist. Marcia was holding the nose up too long, they would stall with barely fifteen hundred feet between them and the fields below. Desperately he yelled to her, and then he saw that her arm was stretched in front of Paul, pinning him to his seat. The boy's face was white, but he was watching her bravely, and even as Melrose saw her smile, and realized with sick horror the nature of the trick they had planned, she withdrew her arm.

CHAPTER 5 : FALSE SANCTUARY

IT all happened so quickly after that slim arm was withdrawn.

Melrose felt the blood coursing to his head, the belt drawn tight under his stomach ; he saw a small body, all arms and legs, pitch downwards in front of his eyes, a body he made a futile attempt to grasp with both hands outstretched ; he caught one glimpse of a white frightened face, lips moving as if in supplication, and then it was gone, and he was staring at an empty seat, from which hung the unfastened ends of the safety belt.

Serenely, as if Paul had been so much ballast which the plane was glad to shed, it completed a half roll and continued on its way ; the strain on his waist relaxed, and he looked up to see Marcia pointing unconcernedly over his shoulder.

There, with a final unfolding of its whiteness, a parachute hung poised and began to float lazily downwards, while a small figure swayed and dangled beneath it like a sawdust doll.

Melrose loosened his safety belt and leaned over to shake Marcia's shoulder.

"Put her down, you little fool !" he shouted.
"He'll break his leg !"

But Marcia's answer was to point to a figure who was

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already hurrying across the field to where he judged the boy would land.

"You can fetch him in the car," she shouted, and without turning to see whether he had heard, she headed towards her own landing-ground.

Melrose raged inwardly, but he was helpless ; short of overpowering her he could do nothing. That figure running to catch the boy had filled him with unreasoning fear, and he unstrapped his parachute harness and jumped from the plane before Marcia had brought it finally to rest.

He fell to his knees and was almost scalped by the tail plane, but he was waiting on no ceremony ; he picked himself up and sprinted the hundred yards across the grass to the car. With savage haste he flung open the gate and left it dangling on a broken hinge, then he leapt into the car and set out at breakneck speed to find the field where Paul had come down.

Even as he forced the utmost out of the car, driving with a mad recklessness which Marcia would never achieve, he knew he would be too late. But the effort had to be made, and he made it with a disregard for his own safety and of others who might be on the road that was a measure of his despair. Two miles of country lane, covered in as many minutes, brought him to a line of willows that he had marked from the air, and he pulled up with screaming tyres by the gate from which the rescuers had entered the field.

One glance over the barred gate showed him that his quest was vain. Fifty yards from where he was sitting he saw the tangled mass of the parachute. No attempt had been made to move it from where it

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fell, and the straps that had carried Paul safely to the ground were empty. They had delivered him into the hands of the enemy.

Melrose looked round wearily and drew a hand across his brow. A vague idea of pursuit made him look up the lane, and he saw what he ought to have seen before, had not his mind clung to the hope that Paul would still be in the field.

Drawn up across the lane, and blocking it from side to side, was an old touring car. A hulk that must have been obtained for that sole purpose. He knew without stirring from his seat that it would be useless to try and move it. Even if the thing would go—which was absurd—pursuit would be out of the question by the time the road was free. Mechanically he reversed the Lagonda into the gateway and retraced the way he had come. He knew that if he was to save Paul he must force his brain to work clearly. There must be something he could do, some way he could retrieve the blunder he had made. Blunder? Was it a blunder to have trusted Marcia? Paul's sister! The girl with a tongue like a whiplash, eyes that burned with an unholy mockery, but who surely would not stoop to such vileness.

"There must be some mistake," he muttered. "She hates, but she hates cleanly. She is cruel, but it is the cruelty of the knife, not the slow torture that poisons the soul. There must be some mistake!"

But even while he was saying it, he knew there was not. The thing had happened before his eyes. Everything, down to the suspicion of Bob Anderson, could be laid to her account. Every small incident built up

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into a damning proof of her guilt, and as he drew up at the landing-field, to find her waiting for him by the gate, he looked at her with a cold, passionless contempt that drained the blood from her cheeks.

"Get in!" he ordered, and she recoiled as if he had cracked a whip over her head.

"I will drive," she replied shakily, with an attempt to recover herself, but Melrose did not deign to answer, and she climbed in beside him. He drove off without a look or a word, and after a glance at his bleak eyes and set lips she did not disturb him.

The butler opened the door to them and Melrose asked him curtly whether his servant Price had come.

"A Mr. Price has inquired for you and is now waiting in the garage, sir," the butler answered.

"Tell him to come to Mr. Thurston's study at once," Melrose rapped out, and leaving the butler to stare after him with sagging mouth, he escorted Marcia across the hall, and ushered her with scant ceremony into her father's room.

Mr. Thurston was bending over his desk, and Bob Anderson was standing at his side when they entered, and both men looked up in surprise. Thurston began an angry rebuke, but Melrose cut him short and faced him grimly.

"Paul has gone," he said.

Mr. Thurston stared at him uncomprehendingly, and then as the truth dawned on him his face went white, and he began to shake as with a palsy. Twice he tried to speak and twice his trembling lips refused to do him service. Then his shoulders sagged and he fell forward.

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Melrose and Anderson eyed each other over his crumpled body. If Melrose still wanted proof of the secretary's innocence he had it then. Grim-lipped and motionless the man stood beside his employer, and his big fists doubled themselves into huge threatening knots, then, without a word, he fetched brandy from a cupboard behind him and forced Mr. Thurston to drink.

When the unhappy man was sufficiently recovered, Melrose told them what had happened. His account was a cold statement of fact, in which he spared neither himself nor the girl, and when he had finished he looked at his watch.

"They have half an hour's start. If they intend leaving the country we ought to be able to stop them. It's probable that they are making for the nearest coast—Yarmouth or Cromer—and we'll stop those holes first. After that a general notification to all ports and aerodromes."

"Suppose they go to ground over here?" Anderson hazarded.

"Then, every policeman in the country will be on the look-out for them," Melrose answered savagely. "We know their names, we know what they look like. We'll notify all the papers and Mr. Thurston will offer a reward. Now get through to the police."

"Wait!" Marcia's clear voice rang out imperatively, and Melrose wheeled round to confront her. While he had been telling his story she had stood with her back to them, gazing out of the window. Now she came forward and stood close to her father's desk. She was still pale and her face showed signs of the

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strain she had been through, but her nerves were steady, and she eyed them calmly.

"You are forgetting that since I planned Paul's removal I also know where he is going," she said. "Why not ask me to tell you?"

"We expect no help from you," Melrose replied bitterly.

"Help, no, but information, yes," she retorted. "I tried to warn you, Mr. Melrose, that I like my own way, and that I resent interference from strangers. You were foolish enough not to listen—please don't interrupt—and your pride has been hurt. Our family quarrels have nothing whatever to do with you, and if my father was foolish enough to ask for your help, that is his look-out."

"Family quarrels?" Melrose admitted that he was dazed.

"If you don't believe me," she said sarcastically, "look at my father. His face will tell you whether I am lying."

Melrose and Anderson turned bewildered eyes on Mr. Thurston. The man was staring at his daughter, his lips twitching, his body straining back in his chair as if he would escape from the merciless accusation of her eyes. If ever guilt and abject fear were written on a man's face it was written on his, and Melrose turned from him in disgust.

But Marcia leaned forward and compelled her father to listen.

"You have always hated me," she said. "You let me grow up alone, you did not care what happened to me, and you would have driven me away if you hadn't

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wanted my mother's money. To keep that you kept me, and because your share wasn't big enough you took mine. Since then you have grown rich, but you have not paid back what you owe me. . . ."

"I will, Marcia, I swear I will, if you bring Paul back," Mr. Thurston gabbled pitifully, but she scorned his pleading.

"It is too late for remorse now," she said coolly. "You should have thought of that before. My demands have gone up and as your daughter I claim my share of your fortune—which you made with money stolen from me."

"You shall have whatever you ask. . . ."

"I know that," the girl answered, "but in the meantime Paul has gone to his mother—I expect she will have claims on your . . . generosity too!"

"Oh, no! You couldn't do that! You don't know what you have done. She is inhuman, vile!"

"Are you particularly human?" his daughter asked with insolent mockery.

But Thurston was beyond the appeal of reason. His arms threshed the air, and his face was contorted while he mouthed unintelligible curses until Melrose caught him by the shoulders and forced him back into his chair. More brandy was poured down his throat, and when it seemed that the paroxysm would pass in a fit of coughing he clutched Melrose's arm and besought him to listen.

"I admit what she has said about me," he said. "It is true I have robbed her, but that other woman . . . she is a devil! You must save Paul. It was because of him I left her. If she gets hold of him she

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will never let him go—and after a time he will cease to be Paul. You must believe me ! ”

There was no doubt that the man was speaking the truth ; his fear for his son was genuine, and when he had made his appeal he bowed his head in his arms and began to sob like a child.

Melrose frowned at his heaving shoulders and then turned his attention to the girl.

“ Did you know this ? ” he inquired.

Marcia shrugged carelessly.

“ Madame de Lorraine is hard, of course,” she answered, “ but who wouldn’t be after dealing with him ! ”

The callous comment hardened John’s sympathy which had been ready to return to her. He saw too the shadow of doubt and fear cross her eyes as she mentioned Paul’s mother, and he was inclined to think that there was good reason for the man’s outburst.

“ I suppose you arranged this business with your cousin ? ” he asked.

“ Of course.”

“ Any one else ? ” he asked, remembering the blond man Price had seen with the Frenchman.

“ No. Why should there be any one else ? Paul knows Pierre, and would go with him. I gave Pierre a note to show him.”

The girl was thorough, and he believed she was telling the truth, but the fact remained that another man was involved, and that man tallied with the description Thurston had given him of Strauss.

He looked round in some perplexity wishing that Price were here to confirm what he had said over the

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telephone, and there to his surprise was his man standing by the door, hat in hand, gravely waiting the correct moment to step forward.

" You were engaged when I came in, sir. I understand you wanted to speak to me."

Nothing had ever been known to upset his imperturbable servant, and the glimmer of a smile came to John's eye : the first since Paul had vanished.

" I do, Price. Did you see any more of that other man you mentioned before you left the hotel ? "

" Yes, sir. He left in company with the other gentleman while I was settling my bill."

John nodded and turned to Mr. Thurston, who was now sufficiently recovered to sit up.

" Why did you tell me you suspected the man Strauss ? "

" Because he threatened me," Mr. Thurston replied eagerly, " but I see now I was mistaken. He can have had nothing to do with it. . . ."

" That's where you are wrong," Melrose answered soberly. " Strauss was at the Maid's Head in Norwich one hour before Paul was abducted."

" What has that to do with it, and who is Strauss ? " the girl asked.

Melrose did not answer. He saw that both her questions were genuine, and in the turmoil that followed a fresh outburst of panic from Mr. Thurston he made up his mind that the plot was deeper than she had imagined. She had played Paul as a pawn thinking herself a queen, and though the action was wanton it was not deadly. Once her father had paid his dues there would have been an end of the matter—but now,

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there was evidence that the queen herself was only a pawn. The game was being played for higher stakes than the few thousands she aimed to wring from her father, and Paul was indeed in the talons of the vulture.

That Anderson shared his fears there could be no doubt ; the man's sombre eyes and tense bearing showed how deeply he had been moved, and as their glances met he saw in his a resolution that matched his own. If only Marcia would tell him where the boy was to be taken, there might yet be time . . . there must be time.

" You've done a vile thing," he said to her, each word slow and measured, while his blue eyes held hers remorselessly. " If I did not believe that it is more vile than you intended I would hand you over now to the police, and see that you were branded as you deserve. What you did was wanton, but unless you tell me where they have taken your brother, it may lead to murder."

She did not flinch. Her cheeks were whiter than the silk round her neck, and she put a hand to her throat as if she were choking. But her eyes were defiant.

" I am not so easily frightened, Mr. Melrose," she murmured at last. " Paul is safe enough."

The silence that followed was broken by Bob Anderson.

" The Château Blanc is where they have gone, Miss Thurston," he announced with conviction, and Melrose saw a betraying flicker of dismay darken her eyes.

" Where is this place ? " he asked Anderson, without withdrawing his glance from the girl.

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"In the forests to the south of Poitiers. Madame de Lorraine owns it, and rules over the estate like a feudal lord. . . ."

"Do you know your way there?"

"I have been twice by air on business for Mr. Thurston."

"How long does it take?"

"Roughly five hours in Miss Thurston's plane."

Melrose looked at his watch. The time was barely three o'clock.

"If we start in a quarter of an hour," he said, "we shall have time to look round before dark. You'll come with me?"

"Naturally."

"Then wrap up a few things, will you, and wait for me outside. Price will get the car. I'll join you in a few minutes."

When they were gone he turned to Mr. Thurston. His instructions were brief and his motives plain.

"If I ask for money you will send it at once—however much it is. I am going, not for your sake but Paul's, and when I have got him I will keep him until I am sure that he is no longer in danger. While I am gone—and until I let you know that the boy is safe, you will keep your daughter here, locked up, with some one always on guard. She must not telephone, write letters, or receive visitors. . . ."

"I suppose I shall be allowed to eat?" the girl mocked him.

"If I had my way you would be thrashed," he answered coolly. "Some day I may give myself the pleasure, and if I fail to find Paul I will make it my

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business to see that you go to prison. Now, Mr. Thurston, if you will lead the way to the cellars. . . .”

“The cellars! But you can’t do that to me, in my own house!”

For the first time it seemed that her control was breaking; the sight of her flaming cheeks afforded him a savage pleasure.

“Preferably a coal cellar,” he assured her.

Her hand flashed out and the gloved fingers caught him a stinging blow on the mouth. He had expected no less, but time was short for further argument, so he captured her wrists and pushed her in front of him towards the door. She struggled furiously, but only succeeded in hurting herself. This she realized before they had left the room, and, pride coming to her rescue, she suffered him to guide her down the stone steps into the cellar without further resistance.

The brief conflict had in some queer way revived his sympathy for her, and as he glanced round the cellar to see whether it would guard his prize safely he wondered whether he would ever have the chance to tame her. She was still unrepentant, and he believed that she hated him, but in spite of everything she had done he knew that if he stayed a moment longer he would take her in his arms. A mischievous desire to know what would happen if he did, almost made him succumb to the temptation. Instead, he pulled his cigarette case and matches from his pocket and laid them on the steps.

“These may help you to be patient,” he said, and went out quickly, knowing that she would throw them at his head if he lingered.

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"See that her sleeping quarters are as secure as that cellar," he warned Thurston as he gave him the key.
"The girl will make trouble if she gets out."

Anderson and Price were waiting in the car.

As they drove rapidly to the landing-field Melrose gave Price his instructions. He was to see Sir Charles and tell him as much as he knew, then he was to take the car and follow them to Château Blanc, where he was to remain concealed and where somehow they would contrive to get in touch with him.

"For you see," John told Anderson, "although we go by air it is unlikely that we shall return that way. The Bentley will be our second line of retreat, and Price may prove a useful ally to have in reserve."

Marcia's plane was soon out of the hangar, and while Price and Melrose fixed the wings Anderson checked up on the fuel and oil.

The tanks proved to be three-quarters full—which was a relief. Melrose had half-expected that Marcia would have foreseen this move on his part, and would have drained the ship. Fortunately, the fear was groundless. Nor, so far as he could tell from a rapid inspection, had she tampered with the engine, and he climbed into the cockpit beside Anderson ready to give Price the signal to swing her over.

It was only then that he discovered that the stick was missing.

When he made this discovery Melrose bowed his head in his hands and muttered "Sunk!" with a wealth of feeling that replaced a hundred oaths, but immediately afterwards he straightened his back,

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and his eye met the eye of his servant. Price found the answer to the silent question.

"Mr. Lockhart is always glad to oblige you, sir," he reminded him.

John nodded and tumbled from the cockpit.

Tony Lockhart lived in Norwich when he was not in London, and Tony was an airman with a Percival Gull monoplane of which he was particularly proud. Melrose knew the machine. It was quite twenty miles an hour faster than Marcia's and he gave up at once the idea of searching the woods for a stick to replace the control that Marcia had removed. Such a search and the subsequent fitting of the stick, always supposing a suitable one could be found, would take the best part of half an hour, time which would be better spent in the quest for a faster plane.

The Bentley with the three men aboard turned once more to the open road, and as they sped towards the aerodrome on the outskirts of Norwich where Tony Lockhart housed his plane, Melrose talked to Price. He used to the full the extra quarter of an hour which this check had given him to elaborate his plans. Price was to cross over to France that same night ; to any who had the right to question him he was to explain that he was going to Perignac, the nearest town to Château Blanc, where he would meet his master. There he was to stay at the largest hotel, and keep the car under cover until he received further instructions.

"The Hôtel Briançon is the place," Bob Anderson told them. "I had lunch there once. Good spot. By the way, what about a passport for the boy ? I found yours in your room, and brought it along."

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"What about your own?"

"Here!" Anderson announced, slapping his breast pocket. "I've not been a secretary for two years without learning my job."

John nodded.

"Then, the only one we need is the boy's. Sir Charles must fix that, Price. Tell him to send it to the Briançon."

As he spoke they drew up at the aerodrome. Two minutes later he was speaking to Lockhart on the phone, while a mechanic was preparing the "Gull" for flight. Tony had no objection to lending his aeroplane, and when his casual inquiry into the purpose and destination of the journey was answered with an equally careless, "Merely a jaunt," he laughed. Melrose's jaunts were famous.

"Well, good luck," he wished him. "You'll find maps, permits, carnets, and the rest of the necessary junk tucked away somewhere. Oh, and take care of the field-glasses, they are not mine, but they're good. She'll do seven hundred without a refill, but if you want more take a look at the maps. I've ringed the spots where I'm known. One of them may be on your line, and if it is you'll be treated like visiting royalty. So long!"

"So long, Tony. I'll try not to crack her up," John answered gratefully.

He rejoined the others who were waiting beside the blue-winged monoplane. Jenkins, the mechanic, grinned a welcome, and bawled in his ear that the engine was running as sweet as a nut.

"Going far?" he shouted.

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"South," John answered, with a glance at the wind indicator.

"Following wind," the mechanic yelled. "About ten I should say. When'll you be back?"

"When you see us," Melrose answered and climbed into the cabin. The glass cover was locked into place. He tested the controls, and glanced at the instrument board as he played with the throttle ; then he showed with a wave of his hand that he was ready. Price and the mechanic stood clear while the aeroplane gathered way and bumped over the field. At the far end he turned and opened the throttle ; the bumps grew lighter as the tail came up, then they ceased altogether and Anderson looking forward over the leading edge of the wing saw that they were in the air. The white sock disappeared beneath them ; he saw the road on which a few minutes before they had been racing from Coltishall, then the left wing dipped and they banked round over Norwich. He saw the railway station beside the river, with the rows of metals gleaming in the sunlight ; the cathedral wheeled into view, then another station, and once again the river winding east, this time towards the sea. Almost before he had time to pick out other familiar landmarks the city was left behind, and they were flying over a patchwork quilt of roads and fields which grew more and more unreal and maplike as they gained height. Very soon he ceased to recognise the ground over which they flew ; he followed the path of a road with a wondering eye, and had just found that it led to the sea when Melrose aroused him from his abstraction, and bid him spread a map out on his knee.

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"At the moment," John told him, "I am only guessing the course. Check up, will you, and give me a direct line."

Anderson unfolded the map and ran his finger over the intricate tracings until he found the place he wanted.

"Here is Château Blanc," he said. "It lies in a fold of the hills at the head of a valley. The country is wild and heavily wooded except in the valleys. The only landing-place I know belongs to the château, and is in a field in full view of the front windows."

"Then we must find another," Melrose answered philosophically. "When you have given me a bearing, tell me all you know about the château and its occupants."

From Anderson's description it appeared that the ridges which stretched on either side of the château like protective fingers ran down to a main valley through which flowed a river. These ridges were part of a chain extending to the east of the house, and growing increasingly precipitous as the main valley shelved, while the intermediate valleys which divided these ridges grew accordingly less accessible.

"Look at it this way," Anderson told him, with his left hand on the map, fingers outspread and thumb tucked under his palm.

"Château Blanc lies between my first and second fingers, tucked up at the top. It faces south towards the river and the *route nationale*, which runs east and west past my finger nails. The ridge on the right (my first finger) is the last of the chain. Up at the top near

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the house it is anything up to eight hundred feet high, and the houseward slope is steep. Half a mile farther down (round about my knuckle, since the whole ridge is considerably over a mile long) both sides are easy enough for a motor drive to wind up through the trees and drop down to another road, which meets the *route nationale*. I happen to know that that drive is very rarely used. Another one with an easier gradient has been made half a mile farther down, and the old one is neglected. Last time I went to Château Blanc I walked up it out of curiosity and found that a tree had fallen across it in such a way that a big car would have difficulty in passing. However—to return to my fingers. The valley in which Château Blanc lies is hardly more than the width of the house at the top, though, of course, it widens out considerably. Lower down lawns and gardens in falling terraces open out into fields, and one of these has been converted into a landing-ground. It was there Miss Thurston set me down on the two occasions she flew me over, and I was impressed by the matter of fact way in which a couple of mechanics took charge of the plane and wheeled it into one of the hangars."

"Then they have other aeroplanes?" Melrose queried.

"Must have, although I didn't see them. Madame de Lorraine believes in mixing the old with the new, as you will see for yourself, and her nephew, Pierre Chenevoix, can never forget that he has a pilot's licence."

"Well, that's worth knowing," Melrose answered.
"Go on with your tale."

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"Somewhere behind the house is a spring. The water serves the dual purpose of providing electricity and something to drink before it joins the river. Also behind the house are the ruins of the old castle ; the original and much more grim building from which the present one gets its name. It was built on solid rock, and although it is uninhabitable enough remains to show how once it must have dominated the scene. Behind the old castle the valley ends in a steep precipitous pitch. You might climb up it in daylight, but I wouldn't give much for your chance of doing it at night."

"What about the ridge to the left of the house ? "

"I should say it is twice the height of the other—nearly fifteen hundred feet. The sides are steep and covered with trees, in fact the whole country except the green strips in the valleys is heavily wooded. You'll find no roads over that ridge, nothing but an occasional zigzagging path used by woodsmen and poachers."

"How about the valley beyond ? Any chance of putting the ship down there ? "

"I doubt it. As far as I remember this second valley is much narrower than the one that shelters the château. The lower end near the river is open to pasture, but all the rest is wooded. In fact the whole place is pretty desolate. Madame de Lorraine does not encourage neighbours. . . ."

He relapsed into silence with his sentence unfinished and Melrose did not prompt him. The sun was getting low and he bent his whole mind to the task of reaching the vicinity of the Château Blanc while there was yet

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light enough to make a good landing. He had no wish to be forced down in country which he saw was rapidly growing more mountainous.

If Anderson's calculations were correct they should be approaching the ridges he had mentioned, and he was relieved when, after a further ten minutes, Anderson tapped his shoulder and pointed downwards.

There, beneath them, spreading away to the left, were the ridges, and he noted the aptness of his companion's description. Like so many fingers splayed out at the tips they undulated in a series of light and dark shadows where the sun struck across them. He could count seven before they became merged together and he swung the plane a trifle to the left so that they could look down into the first two. Ostensibly he followed the road which Anderson had mentioned, but from the height at which he was flying, and with the help of Tony's borrowed glasses, he was able to pick out the white oblong which he knew was the château.

A quick survey showed him the landing-field and the impossibility of landing anywhere in the valley without attracting the immediate attention of the people at the château. Within five minutes of the time when his wheels touched the ground they would be inquiring his business, and from what Anderson had told him of madame he would be escorted into her presence without delay.

Anxiously he raised his glasses to the farther ridge and scanned the second valley. The farther end was open as Anderson had promised, but it was altogether too public. The *route nationale* following the curve of the river commanded the sloping fields of the valley.

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Then came the trees, a thick and apparently pathless forest—no, there was a glade. He followed the line of the glade with more curiosity than hope. It was beginning to appear as if he would have to go further afield when he gave a shout of joy—the glade had opened out into a clearing. From the height at which he was flying the space looked no larger than a pale green lawn laid in the middle of the forest, but he knew that he could land there. It was almost a perfect square set there for some inscrutable reason ; there was no sign of house or garden, and if he gave a thought to the reason for its existence it was only to bless the woodsman who had contrived so admirable a retreat.

Briefly he explained his intentions to Anderson.

" We will turn left at the river and follow the river valley until we are out of sight and hearing of the château. If they have seen us go by they will forget us. Then we will drop down and circle back. I think I can make the landing without using the engine, and we shall be out of sight from the house. There's a chance, of course, that the ground's a bog, in which case we shall have fun—but it's worth trying."

Anderson nodded. They reached the river, and Melrose banked and circled once as if he were uncertain of his bearings, and then headed up the valley. Five minutes later he was wheeling again, and with his engine at half-throttle he passed back along the spurs, losing height all the time so as to be unnoticed from the château. Finally he shut off his engine altogether and began a slow glide, holding up the nose until he barely had flying speed. In this way they rounded the last spur and began to coast towards the trees.

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They dropped lower and lower. From the angle at which they approached, and because of some unnoticed tilt in the ground, it had been impossible to get a second view of the clearing. Melrose knew that it was at the end of the glade, but he did not know how near it was to the head of the valley. The ridges were encroaching on either side of him, and the slope at the far end was drawing dangerously close. It was swiftly assuming the appearance of a wall, against which it seemed inevitable that they must crash.

Underneath their wheels was the unbroken forest, a dark green sea waiting to engulf them ; he dared not fly too low. Even now, if the clearing proved too small, it might be impossible to win clear of the valley. He decided that if it did not show up within the next ten seconds he would have to start his engine. His hand was on the switch ready to make the last desperate bid for safety when he saw the clearing.

It flashed into view and he sideslipped downwards all in the same moment of time.

Anderson caught his breath as the far wall of trees raced towards them. They would be smashed. The plane was slewed sideways and was charging the serried trunks, then with a drunken stagger the nose came round and the wheels bumped the ground. Now they were heading straight for the nearest trunks, and he gripped the sides of his seat as he waited for the shock.

But John had seen what he had missed. At the far side of the clearing was a glade similar to the one over which they had been flying. It was wide enough to hold the plane, and although he could have stopped

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with a dozen yards to spare, he purposely ran under the shelter of the trees.

Several moments passed before Anderson would admit that they were safe, and then he brought his hand down with a resounding smack on John's shoulder.

"Done it in one!" he laughed. "I made sure that particularly handsome tree on my left was going to impale me!"

"We're in luck," Melrose answered. "She'll be safe enough here. Out of sight, and yet as handy as if she were in our own hangar."

"Thanks to you. If any one had told me that we could land on a lawn the size of a billiard table I'd have called him a liar—and I would have been wrong. What do we do now?"

"Turn her round so that she's ready for the get-away."

Anderson scrambled out. He stretched luxuriously and stamped on the turf to free his muscles. John, who had paused to sling the field-glasses round his neck, followed him and sniffed appreciatively.

"Pine trees," he said.

Together they lifted the tail and guided the plane round until it faced the clearing. It would be tricky work taking off down a tree-lined runway, with maybe a cross wind at the end, but the time to bother about that was when it had to be done.

They straightened their backs and surveyed their handiwork. The green sanctuary was already in shadow. The air was still and heavy with the scent of the pine trees, and somewhere close at hand they

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could hear the splashing of a brook. The sound reminded them that they were thirsty ; also that they were hungry.

"When do we eat ?" Anderson asked.

"Where would be more to the point," Melrose answered. "I fancy the château will have to solve both problems. Shall we go ? We might pass by way of the brook. A wash and a drink would be welcome."

"I hate climbing on an empty stomach," Anderson sighed, "and French water is the home of typhoid—but when the devil drives . . ."

They turned to enter the trees, and then stopped dead in their tracks.

A man was watching them with scowling distrust. That he resented their intrusion was obvious. Any foolish doubts they might have cherished were effectively dispelled by the sporting gun which he held at the ready, his fingers on the trigger.

Anderson was the first to recover his power of speech.

"Behold the reception committee," he murmured. "He seems annoyed. I wonder why ?"

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MELROSE decided to find out. He stepped forward with as much unconcern as he could muster, and tried to smile pleasantly, while all the time he was conscious of the man's truculent stare and of the thick finger curled round the trigger of the gun.

With an airy wave of his hand which embraced his companion, the aeroplane, and most of the scenery, he explained in French that they had run out of petrol. He pointed out how fortunate they had been to find the clearing, as they would otherwise most assuredly have broken their necks.

At this point he paused to see how his story was being received, and was shocked to find that it wasn't. The man was staring at him in sneering disbelief ; the gun was shifted so that both barrels pointed with unwavering certainty at his stomach, while its owner spat with deliberate contempt on the ground at his feet.

"I watched you," he growled, and his voice was as coarse as his appearance. "Why, if you had to come down, did you not land in the fields by the river ? Only a fool would fly over these trees."

"We'd seen this spot from the air," Melrose told him. "It looked a likely sort of place and . . ."

"So you have been here before ?" the man sneered, his ugly eyes gleaming with triumph. "Just now you

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came from over there, by the river. When was this other time?"

Melrose knew he had made a mistake. He had roused the man's curiosity, and that was a fatal thing to do with a French peasant. Nothing he could say now would allay his suspicion, and he was just wondering what chance a surprise attack would have when Anderson came to his rescue.

"François!" he rapped out. "You are a servant of Madame de Lorraine, I believe?"

The man's bearded mouth opened to reveal two rows of discoloured teeth. He was obviously too surprised to speak, and before he had gathered his dull wits Anderson stepped closer in a fine fury.

"Answer me, idiot! Do you usually keep the friends of madame waiting while you swallow flies and stare like a disembowelled fish? Madame will have you thrashed when I tell her how you have treated us."

"But, monsieur, how was I to know . . . ?" the fellow stammered.

"It is your business to know. What are you doing here?"

"My hut, monsieur, it is among the trees. . . . I was shooting a squirrel when I saw monsieur's 'plane. . . ."

"You will take us to your hut," Anderson interrupted imperiously. "There you will give us food. We have business to do for madame and already darkness falls. It is understood?"

The man quailed before Anderson's threatening manner and stumbled away in the direction of his hut, muttering volubly to himself and casting repeated

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glances over his shoulder to see whether they were following.

"How did you manage it?" Melrose whispered.

"Recognized him. Saw madame talk to him once. He's some sort of keeper. She gave him hell and I took the tip."

They reached the hut, which proved to be a single-roomed cabin built of pine logs, set back about fifty yards from the glade. The brook which had aroused their desire ran past the door, and the stumps of some half-dozen trees pointed to the labour that had gone to the clearing of a breathing space round the hut.

But for the surly owner the place would have made an excellent base for their enterprise, and the same thought occurred to them simultaneously.

"Suppose we put him out of action?" Anderson queried wistfully. "My arm has been aching for a little gentle exercise ever since I saw his ugly face."

"Better not," Melrose cautioned. "Put the fear of God into him instead, and leave him here to guard the aeroplane."

Anderson nodded.

"Perhaps the chance will come later. Will you bathe first or shall I?"

"I will. You'd better give him some more third degree."

Anderson strolled towards the hut, from which there came almost immediately a howl of terror from François and an unending stream of abuse from his tormentor. Occasional words of English were mingled with the stream of idiomatic French, but for the most part it was language which a son of France was best

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suited to understand and which would fill his Gallic soul with an impotent desire for vengeance.

"So long as desire doesn't get the upper hand we shall be well served," Melrose grinned as he stripped off his clothes.

Either of intent or of nature a pool had been made within sight of the hut, and as the water closed round his body he gasped with the sudden cold. A few seconds of wild splashing was as much as he could bear before he pulled himself out on the bank and sluiced the water from his tingling skin with his hands. He had no towel, but a brisk sprint up and down the bank was an adequate substitute, and when he was dressed he walked back to the hut with the knowledge that he was ready for whatever adventure lay ahead.

He found Anderson superintending a huge pot from which came a vastly appetizing smell, and bidding him hurry his bathe he sat down in his place.

François was sulky. All the spirit was knocked out of him, and when Anderson returned he made haste to serve them, refusing to eat himself until he was sure that they were satisfied.

Melrose had long since given up hope of reaching a vantage point from which to view the château in daylight. His concern now was whether they should lose their way in the darkness, and when the meal was over he told Anderson to ask whether there was a path up the hillside.

"Let him know," he said, with a jerk of his head towards François, who was eating greedily as if he expected them to snatch his food away at any moment, "let him know that our business is secret ; that we

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must enter the château to-night. Also that no one must know we are here, and that we shall be back sometime to-morrow. If you like to add that we are authorized to reward a willing helper with five hundred francs when the job's done, you can."

Anderson looked up from the pipe he was lighting.

"François, listen to me," he ordered.

The only response was a gulping sound and the clatter of a plate on the wooden floor.

"Stand up!" Anderson shouted. "Do you always sit with a full mouth when a viscomte addresses you?"

The man stood up, visibly shaken by this revelation of his guest's rank, and Anderson proceeded to drag from him the information they required. The promise of a reward loosened the fellow's tongue, and Anderson's final threat that he would break his neck with his own hands if he forgot his promise of secrecy made him pitifully eager to set them on their way.

He assured them that the moon would guide them when they reached the top of the ridge, and as there was no longer any reason to delay they followed him from the hut.

Night had fallen while they were eating. Or rather, the prelude to night, when the sky still holds a faint glow and one has to look hard to see the stars. In another quarter of an hour it would be black as velvet under the trees, and as they stumbled after François, who picked his way over fallen branches and ditches with the unerring instinct of a woodsman, they began to wish they had a lantern. They could only hope that the path would prove easier to follow than this unmarked trail.

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Five minutes rough going brought them to the foot of the hill, and there François stopped. They would have no difficulty now, he assured them.

"But, the path," Anderson stormed. "Where is the path, you gibbering fool?"

"This is the path," the man answered. "It leads to my cottage. We have followed it so far. Now it goes up the hill—like a snake. If you cannot see, perhaps you want me to lead you?"

That was the last thing they wanted, and after being assured that they had only to climb the hill to reach the top, they told him to return to his hut, and he left them gladly enough.

"Will he try to follow us, do you think?" Melrose asked.

"I don't think so, though heaven knows he'd find it easy enough," Anderson answered, as a dead branch cracked with a report like a pistol shot under his foot.

"Friend François doesn't like us—if you used a stronger word, I shouldn't object—but he knows when he's well off."

"Well, I hope you haven't twisted his tail too much."

Anderson grunted an inaudible reply. The gradient was beginning to tell, and for the next half-hour neither of them had breath to waste on words.

Path there may have been, but it never came their way. Five minutes' search was long enough to convince them that if they were to reach the top it must be by a route of their own, and a further five minutes convinced them that direct assault was useless. More often than not they were on their hands and knees, clawing at the slippery pine needles which gave no

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purchase to their shoes. Frequently they collided with trees, bruising their hands on the rough bark, cracking their shins or banging their heads.

The only possible method was François's method of the snake : A long traverse to the right, handing themselves from trunk to trunk, and then a traverse to the left. It doubled the distance, but may well have halved the time, and although their ankles were sore from the strain of bracing themselves across the steep slope, Anderson for one believed that it saved his life.

"Another minute of that Excelsior stuff and I'd gladly have rolled back down the hill until a tree brained me," he declared when they reached the top.

Some fifty feet of comparatively flat going took them over the brow of the hill, and Melrose was delighted to see that François had once more proved himself a true prophet.

The whole valley beneath them, except for the slope of the far ridge, was bathed in moonlight, and although they could not actually see the house because of the branches of the trees, they welcomed the opportunity to regain their breath and to discover their bearings.

Anderson, who knew the lie of the land, was able to point out that they must be slightly behind the house.

"All the better," Melrose answered, as he lay down on the carpet of pine needles beside him. "And now we may as well do some talking, because when we get down there we won't have the chance."

He rolled over to ease the cigarette case from his pocket, and groaned when he remembered the quixotic act which had made him leave it with Marcia.

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"The first thing I do in that house will be to lay hands on some cigarettes," he grumbled, and rolled over again with his eyes on the stars.

"I fancy," he continued after a while, "that madame will not be expecting us—yet. She *will* be expecting the girl, and until she comes she will keep Paul here."

"Do you think he is down there now?"

"No. Work it out this way. The first thing they would expect us to do would be to warn the police: that effectively blocks all the usual exits. They are left with two loopholes: a private aeroplane or a yacht. For several reasons I back the yacht. First, because they drove towards the coast, and second, because I doubt whether they could have reached the château before us, even had they flown—and they certainly have not come since or we should have heard them. If I am right, Paul will arrive sometime to-morrow, probably in the morning."

"I may be dense," Anderson interrupted, "but with an hour's start they ought to arrive an hour ahead and . . ."

"You're wrong. We were hurrying. Once they were in the air they would take it easily. You may not know it, but we averaged about a hundred and fifty on the way over. Most private 'planes can't get within thirty miles of that speed, except when they are pushed, and from what you have told me about Pierre Chenevoix, his mechanics would have had a busy time looking things over when he came in. If you remember, the field was deserted, and the sock wasn't even up."

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"I stand reproved," Anderson murmured. "Carry on."

"In a few minutes you and I are going down to those ruins, which you say lie behind the château. From there, sometime after midnight—or later, if there is any sign of wakefulness—you will help me to get into the house. By the way, does madame keep dogs?"

"I saw none."

"That's just as well. When I am safely inside you go back into hiding.

"Wait a minute! That's not my idea . . ."

"Don't worry, you'll have plenty to do. As soon as it's daylight you will discover the easiest way up the ridge and down to the 'plane. If you see François skulking around, you can brain him and tie him to the nearest tree. Only remember that the path you choose must be out of sight of the house and one that won't break Paul's heart."

"How are you going to get him?"

"That must depend on circumstances. The general idea is to be inside when he comes and to find out where they put him. Unless he's drugged—which I don't think likely—I'll get word to him somehow, and between us we'll manage."

"And suppose you don't—manage?"

"Then, it will be either because I have been caught or because the prison is too solid for one pair of hands. The game will be up to you. That is one reason why I want you to stay outside. Wait till half an hour before sunset, and then go for Price. You can conceal the car somewhere along that disused drive you mentioned, because we shall no longer be able to count on

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the 'plane. Give me till sunset of the following day to reach you, and if I fail, I suggest that the best thing to do will be to drive up to the front door and threaten to shoot the place up if they don't let us go. Price will have guns. He never goes abroad without them."

Anderson smoked in silence. He could pick a hundred holes in the plan ; he foresaw the many disasters that could upset their hopes, but because he trusted Melrose, and because he believed that in spite of everything he would succeed, he raised no objections. His own part would be chiefly waiting, the inglorious rôle of spectator, but he did not complain, and when Melrose asked whether he had any suggestions, he shook his head.

"None, except that we had better be going while there's a moon to guide us, and on the way I will tell you all I know about the inside of the house. I don't know a great deal, but at least I can stop you from blundering into madame's bedroom !"

They got up and dusted the pine needles from each other's backs. The moon was shedding a speckled glory around them, and their eyes had by now grown so accustomed to the darkness that Melrose was able to slip his arm through Anderson's and to walk by his side. Trees loomed ahead of them, but were seen in time to be avoided, and as they strolled down the hill, bearing always to the right so that they would strike the enclosing wall of the valley some hundred feet above the ruins of the old castle, Anderson told him all he knew about the great dining-room with its tapestries and table of black oak that shone like marble ; of the central hall, from which ran the wide

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staircase that served the two floors above ; of madame's suite, which stretched from end to end of the first floor and faced the valley ; of the magnificent furniture, centuries old, the library of precious books, the gallery of paintings . . .

So vivid was the picture that Melrose felt that he was returning to the house after a long absence, and that even the stair-rods would be familiar. He was so absorbed and so busy impressing the details on his mind that he took little notice of their progress, until a chance gap in the trees showed him the château itself standing in the full light of the moon.

He pressed Anderson's arm and drew him to a stand-still.

They were behind the château, which, from this angle, resembled the solid grey back of a sow sheltering a litter of sucklings in the form of outbuildings.

Anderson named the uses to which the various buildings were put :

"Power-house and laundry on the left, servants' quarters on the right, stables and garages this end. As you see, the outbuildings are roughly in the form of a hollow square. There is a cobbled yard between them and the back of the château, and a covered way leading from the servants' wing to the kitchens."

"Several lights still burning," Melrose commented, with a glance at his watch. "They keep late hours—it's nearly eleven."

"We must wait for the moon to go down in any case," Anderson replied. "Your only chance of getting in is through the servants' quarters and into the covered passage that leads to the kitchens."

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"How do I get into the courtyard?"

"You don't. Both the main doors will be locked. We shall have to go round the outside. I think we shall find a window, if not a door, unlatched. With so many servants there is bound to be carelessness and, besides, they have no reason to lock themselves in securely, because their numbers make them feel safe. It's the lonely man who takes precautions."

Melrose nodded.

"I hope you are right, but I shall not be able to come back the same way in daylight."

"There will be no need to. Make straight for the main gate of the courtyard and pretend that you are taking Paul to see the horses. When you come out on this side bear slightly to the right. Do you see those trees? They can't be more than a hundred yards from the stables. Once you are under cover you can run for the ruins."

"You think it will be safe to walk openly through that courtyard?"

"Perfectly safe—until the alarm is given from the house. The only people you have to fear are madame herself and that fellow Strauss, madame's secretary, and the major domo. The rest of the servants will imagine that Paul is a guest, and though they may be surprised to see you with him, they will not stand in your way. Visitors are in the habit of using that courtyard—I have done so myself."

The reasoning was sound as Melrose knew, and with a final glance at the buildings, one half of which the moon had already left in shadow, he followed Anderson

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down the steep slope and through a crumbling archway into the ruins of the old château.

The place was spacious, and although the roof had long since fallen, leaving the walls open to the stars, it afforded them ample cover. They picked their way over blocks of fallen stone and between the rank under-growth of shrubs until they came to the forward edge. This proved to be a wall rather higher than their heads, but pierced at regular intervals with narrow slits, through which a man might observe all that went on in the courtyard below. Bushes growing from cracks in the masonry effectively hid them, even from above, and they settled down to watch until the last light in the château was extinguished.

Half an hour went by before Anderson, who was taking his turn of vigil, announced that the place was in darkness.

"We'll give them another hour," Melrose answered.

The minutes of waiting passed slowly. The uncanny stillness stretched their nerves and made them long to be about their business. An owl screeching in the woods behind made them start, and brought the sweat to their temples, while the chill mountain air stiffened their muscles and made them wish for the comfort of a fire.

At last they judged that the time was come. The moon was gone, and the valley was in a darkness which would have embarrassed them a few hours ago ; now they thought of it only as a cloak to conceal their actions.

They moved out from the ruins and took to the woods on the right, working round the closed end of

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the valley until they were opposite the grey stone building which housed the servants. Often, as they crept downwards, a twig would snap under a shoe, and they would stand motionless with held breath and beating heart, waiting for a light to spring up in a darkened window and the challenge that would follow.

But no one challenged them, and they continued downwards until they came to the fringe of the wood.

Anderson leaned forward over Melrose's shoulder and whispered in his ear.

"There is a railing and a ditch, then grass, a drive, more grass, and finally a low wall which leads into the servants' gardens. I believe there are four cottages divided from each other by fences, but there may be more. You can see the roof line. Start from the end nearest the house, and when you get in go straight through to the back. The passage runs the whole length of the building."

Melrose gripped his hand.

"You will wait here a little while? We may have to try another way where your shoulders would be useful."

"I will wait half an hour, and remember—I shall be watching the back windows of the château with the glasses. Up and down with your handkerchief means that you are still hoping. Sideways that I must go for Price and the car."

"I'll remember—if I get the chance."

Anderson's strong fingers tightened their grip.

"Good luck!" he breathed. "I shall count the minutes until I see you and the kid."

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John returned his clasp and then slipped away.

He found the iron bars of the railing and climbed over, letting himself down gingerly into the ditch. A moment later he was stealing across the grass. It was firm and smooth to his feet, and he knew it was a well-trimmed lawn. Fortunately the ground was hard, and he could only trust to luck that the dew was not heavy enough to leave footprints.

A slight difference in shade warned him that he was come to the drive, and he bent down to feel the surface. It was, as he had feared, of loose gravel, and before crossing he removed his shoes and stuffed one into each jacket pocket. The stones pressed into his stockinginged feet, but he made no sound ; and when he reached the farther gutter, which was of smooth stone, he followed it, partly so that there should be no continuation of footprints in the dew, and partly in the hope that he would strike a path that would lead him to the servants' quarters.

His hope was realized before he had gone twenty yards. A path branched off to the left, and he followed it cautiously. It led him, as he had expected, to a small wicket gate, and as his fingers crept downwards to the latch he took a quick look at the roof line. As far as he could judge this must be the second gateway, but it would be foolish not to try his luck now he was here.

With infinite patience he lifted the latch and swung the gate on its hinges, only to stand with his heart in his mouth as the hinge creaked under his hand. The suspense of the next few moments set his blood pounding. Nothing moved in the rooms above him, and after a while he breathed more easily.

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Reassured, he groped for the handle of the door and twisted it. The door was locked. So also was the window, which was of the old-fashioned rising sash type. He wondered whether the blade of his knife was long enough to swing the latch over, and decided not to risk it until he had tried the doors of the other cottages.

For the next ten minutes he crept along the darkened windows, going always farther from the château, and each failure made him regret that he had not taken Anderson's advice and made sure of the right-hand cottage first.

He was come to the last door in the line, and he resolved that if this one failed to admit him he would use his knife on the window, and trust to luck that no one heard him.

Knife in hand he crept up to the door. He turned the handle without much hope of success—and pushed gently. The door gave under his fingers and his heart leapt with excitement. . . .

But joy died as soon as it was born. The gap was barely an inch wide when he heard a sound which turned hope to rigid despair.

Footsteps rang on the gravel behind him. A man was coming along the drive, and he knew in a flash why the door was unlocked. This was the man's house ; in less than half a minute he would reach his own doorstep, and the game would be up, unless. . . .

He acted with the speed of thought.

The door swung open under his hand and he slipped into the house like a shadow. He closed the door silently and faced round, only to find himself baulked

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by the pitch darkness that confronted him. To seek a hiding-place in the time at his disposal was impossible; within a few seconds the man would follow him in and switch on the light, and he must inevitably be discovered.

It was then that a movement in a room above his head provided a desperate solution.

His fingers were still on the door knob, so swiftly had thought followed thought, and he slid them down until they closed round the key. From outside came the click of a latch as the man opened the gate, and at that same moment Melrose turned the key in the lock.

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WITH his back to the door he waited for the explosion that must follow.

The footsteps came up the path. He heard the man grope for the handle ; his grunt when he found it, and the startled exclamation which followed his first attempt to enter. The second attempt was accompanied by a smothered oath, and when this failed the man must have admitted to himself that the impossible had indeed happened, and that he was locked out of his own house.

With a scream of rage he pounced on the door and shook it violently, while a stream of Gallic abuse rose to a shrill crescendo when he found his efforts unavailing.

Almost at once a light was switched on upstairs and a window was flung open. A piercing female voice demanded the reason for the uproar. Melrose did not wait to hear the argument that followed. He had counted on some such reaction as this from a highly inflammable French couple ; their mutual recriminations would give him time to hide, and would effectively cover any small sound he might make. Besides which, the bedroom door was open, and the light was ample to guide him.

Two strides took him to the foot of the stairs, a third brought him a choice of two doors. One, undoubtedly,

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led to the kitchen and the passage he must eventually take, but he decided that the risk of discovery was too great at the moment. From the sounds that floated down to him he gathered that most of the neighbours were offering advice, and the wise course was to go to earth until peace was restored.

The second door led into what was apparently a sitting-room, and the musty smell showed that it was rarely used by the thrifty householders. There was enough light to show him a convenient sofa, and a second later he was crouching behind it on his haunches and listening with huge enjoyment to the domestic comedy he had aroused.

The indignant housewife was still at the window. She was explaining that the door could not be locked ; she had left it open as usual when she went to bed.

Henri, her husband, was rapidly growing incoherent, but his violent assault on the door was too pointed to be ignored, and she had to pad down in her nightdress and carpet slippers and let him in.

Her exclamation of horrified surprise when she found that the door *was* locked was only matched by Henri's withering sarcasm, and Melrose wanted to laugh out loud when he heard that this was not the first time that she had treated her husband so infamously. He knew then that however much she might rave about burglars and ghosts there would be no search ; she was convicted of a heinous sin, and Henri's maledictions were frightful to hear.

Gradually the tide of battle receded up the stairs and the hall light went out. There was a padding of feet over his head and a heavy thump which could

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only mean that the injured wife had turned to her pillow for comfort. The uneasy silence that followed was broken only by more padding feet. Henri, too, was nursing his grievance and preparing for bed, but no sooner did he slump down at her side than the quarrel began all over again. Both talked at once, and as miraculously both ceased. Man and wife were asleep.

Melrose waited until he judged that the sleep was sound before he crept from his hiding-place.

He felt his way across the room and into the hall. The second door, which he had guessed led into the kitchen, was close to his hand, and he found that he was not mistaken. His nose alone would have told him that this was where the indignant Henri sometimes fed in anger, and a brief investigation showed him a further door.

The kitchen was faintly illuminated from outside, and when he opened the door he saw the reason.

The passage on which he peered, and which was obviously the one that Anderson had described, was lighted at regular intervals by dim bulbs. The light they gave was less than the light of a candle, but it was sufficient to show him the flagged floor and the vaulted roof. The other wall of the passage was built cloister fashion with narrow arches ; these arches had been glassed in ; the glass was thick and opaque, and looked as if it were rarely cleaned.

The passage was deserted, but he hesitated to leave the sanctuary of his doorway. There were five other lights besides the one under which he stood, and any one entering the passage could not fail to see him.

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Still, the gauntlet had to be run.

He closed the door and grinned when he realized that Madame Henri's troubles would begin all over again when Henri found that she had left the wrong door unlocked.

A hurried glance assured him that the passage was still deserted, and he set off as quickly as he dared. His stockinginged feet made little sound, and he reached the far end without, so far as he knew, having been seen.

A door covered with green baize confronted him. His experience of such doors was that they swung open at a push, and he tried his luck. The door opened, and he found that he was in a continuation of the passage with another similar door a few paces ahead. The intervening space was lit by a lamp which must stay alight permanently, since there was no window in either wall.

He listened with his ear close to the second door for a moment and then pushed it firmly. It swung open on well-oiled hinges, and he stepped into what was obviously the château kitchens.

With the door held open so that the light from the passage shone dimly into the room he examined his surroundings.

The room was a large one. Several doors, some of them ajar, no doubt led to the pantries and sculleries and other "offices." On the left, a range and a huge open grill took up most of the wall space, while on various shelves and dressers he saw the flash of metal pans and the dull gleam of china. Both floor and walls were tiled, and directly opposite to where he stood was an open door.

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He decided that this door would lead him into the house proper, but that it would be useless to go there yet. Another two hours must pass before it was light enough to see where he was going. In the meantime here he was at the fountain-head, so to speak ; food and drink sufficient for a regiment were somewhere around, and it was up to him to find them, for it was extremely doubtful whether the chance would come again.

After two fruitless explorations which led him respectively into a scullery and to a flight of steps which led down to a boiler, he found what he wanted —a lavishly stocked larder.

He risked lighting one of the matches Anderson had given him, and with its help he selected the remains of a roast duck, several cold sausages, and a bowl of salad ; to these he added some tartlets and—to his everlasting gratitude—a large bottle of beer from a case which he spied just as the match flickered out between his fingers.

The transfer of his booty to the boiler-room took time and skill, but it was accomplished without mishap, and there followed a pleasant interlude for refreshment during which his only regret was that he had no cigarettes.

After a while the heat from the fire made him drowsy. Eating and the safe bestowal of the remains in the furnace were too quickly over, and the waiting began again. He made himself as comfortable as he could : too comfortable, since it was hard to keep awake. Every now and then his head would nod, and

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he was on the verge of a sleep that would leave him to be trapped like a fox in its earth. When that happened he would jerk awake in a sudden panic and look at his watch, only to find that a mere five minutes had passed. So in fits and starts the hours dragged over him, and he looked up at last to find the grey dawn outside the grimy window.

It was four o'clock, and the time for further adventuring was come.

He calculated that he had at least an hour, and most probably two, in which to examine the house, and find a suitable hiding-place before the servants were about, so he was in no hurry. Five minutes spent in freeing his cramped muscles and putting on his shoes would not be missed ; he longed for water and razor and for a clothes brush to sweep some order into his dishevelled suit, but it was no good wishing, and he set out for the steps.

As he rounded the corner and opened the door into the kitchen he was greeted by a snore that nearly sent him tumbling backwards with shock. Seated at the table with his arms flung out in abandon, and his head buried in the crook of an elbow, a man slept as if he were mortally tired. Even as Melrose watched he snored again, his broad shoulders vibrated, and he moved his head. The movement must have freed his nostrils from his sleeve because from then on his breathing was free and regular.

Alatern, still alight on the floor at his feet, proclaimed his business, and Melrose shivered at the narrowness of his escape. It had not occurred to him that the house would be guarded by a watchman. Such pre-

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cautions savoured of the Middle Ages, and were a warning that Madame de Lorraine was no ordinary woman.

The sleeping man was facing him, and must see him if he woke, but the chance had to be taken ; he crept along the wall, hardly daring to breathe, and slipped past the fellow's sprawling legs. He could see that the door into the house was still open, and he flitted through it gratefully.

Here he could breathe more freely, but that sleeping man had made his task more difficult. He had counted on having the house to himself, but now he must keep eyes and ears doubly on the alert if he was not to be surprised. At any moment the man might wake and return to his vigil, and he had another cold shudder when he realized that he had only the carelessness of an unworthy servant to thank for his present safety.

The short passage he was now in opened as he had expected into the central hall of the château. It was here that he intended to lie concealed if a suitable hole could be found. Anderson had said enough to convince him that this hall was used more than any other room in the house, and what he now saw confirmed that view.

A leather folding-screen was flung across the entrance to the passage from which he emerged, and he knew that the door into the passage would remain closed except at meal times. Above the well of the wide stairway, which curled upwards to the two upper floors, the roof was of glass. The light that filtered down could be controlled by sun-blinds which ran on rollers. The staircase was on the right, and next to it

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was a double swing door quite ten feet in height which led, as he discovered, into a long salon furnished in the French style with elegant chairs and ornate occasional tables and a profusion of brocade. To be in keeping he felt that one ought to be dressed in satin knee-breeches, to take snuff from little enamelled boxes, and to flirt mincingly with the *grandes dames* behind their fans.

On the left of the hall was the dining-room, a magnificent place where the rich hangings, the deep plum velvet curtains and the sober walls, all served as a fitting background to the glistening black oak table that ran down the centre of the room. Even in the pale morning light he saw the reflection of the silver candlesticks on the board, and the snuffed candles showed that no other light was used.

Whatever else Madame might be she was certainly a woman of taste, and the silver bowl of roses which shared the table with the candlesticks showed that she was at least feminine enough to understand the use of flowers.

A second door on the left led to the library. Although the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books he saw that the room's chief use was as a billiard room. A white draped billiard table looked oddly out of place, and the six hanging lamps with their green shades were so shamefully blatant that he could not help wondering whether this was Strauss's work. The woman of the gilded salon and the sombre dining-room surely had no part in this violation.

The next door Melrose opened was a cloak-room, and he wondered whether it would serve as a refuge;

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a moment's thought showed him that it was too risky, and he turned his attention to the hall.

A wide fireplace with a dog grate in which a two-foot log could burn comfortably was the pivot from which the wide leather armchairs, two couches, and half a dozen small tables and stools radiated ; Persian rugs were spread on the parquet floor, and the tall windows to either side of the front door were fitted with wide seats and laid with cushions.

It was a room where the house guests would naturally foregather ; a man concealed there would have his ear on the pulse, he would know everything that was happening—but the maddening fact remained that he could see nowhere to hide.

He walked round it twice, peering into corners for a convenient cupboard, examining the curtains by the window, even looking under the couch, but without success, and at last he gave up in disgust and went up the stairs.

He passed Madame's suite on tiptoe, wondering as he did so which was her bedroom ; concealment on the first floor was out of the question, and so were the front rooms on the second, but at each of the back rooms he listened for a full minute and then tried the handle. Three of them were empty, and the beds were not even made. There at least was a refuge, but he might as well rejoin Anderson in the ruins for all the good he would do by boxing himself up in one of them. Box ? The word rang a bell in his brain. Something to do with the lounge hall below, but for the moment he could not think what it was. He left it to simmer while he completed his exploration, and was

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very glad he did because the next room he tried to enter was locked.

He knew almost as if Madame had told him that this was the room that had been prepared for Paul, and he guessed too that the next room would not be empty.

Sure enough, heavy breathing warned him that at least one person was asleep in there, and he had a shrewd idea who it would be.

"Prisoner and warder," he thought. "Here, the major-domo, and there, Paul, and I bet there will be an open communicating door between the two rooms. Probably a new set of bars to the windows as well."

This discovery rather altered the odds. It was no longer essential to find a hiding-place downstairs—provided that his guess was right. But was it? A room can be kept locked for other reasons than because it has been prepared as a prison. It might, for instance, be simply the major-domo's dressing-room.

He was still debating this problem when a faint jingle warned him that the watchman was awake and on his rounds. He whipped back to the first empty bedroom, and was behind a closed door as quickly as he could move. Sheer self-defence made him take this precaution. The jingle had come from the hall below, and he certainly did not expect the watchman to come prowling among the bedrooms.

But he did come. The heavy flat-footed tread which no carpet, however thick, could completely deaden, came stolidly up the stairs. Without hesitation it turned where he had turned, and for one sickening moment he thought that he had been seen, and that the man was

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coming to get him. The heavy steps came right up to his door, and he crouched ready to spring ; then they passed on without a pause, and his muscles relaxed.

They did not go far. Melrose judged the man to be opposite the major-domo's room when he stopped and rapped on the door. The rapping was repeated a few seconds later, and then, apparently satisfied that he had been heard, he plodded stolidly away—but not the way he had come.

The significance of his action was too apparent. The new day was beginning at the château, and the watchman was going off duty down the back stairs.

There was not a moment to be lost if Melrose was to find another hiding-place. In half an hour, possibly less, the place would be alive with servants, and to be seen out of his covert would be to bring the whole pack at his heels.

He wasted little time in verifying the fact that the back stairs lay beyond the domo's room before returning to the hall. While in hiding he had remembered why the word "box" was so suggestive. To one side of the fire there was a large oak chest, a chair had been pressing up against it, and it had resisted a rather half-hearted attempt to open it, but now he decided to give it another trial.

He moved the chair and saw that the chest was fastened by an ordinary hasp ; inside were a few logs, and he looked quickly at the fire. It had not been used the day before nor, as a glance through the window showed him, was it likely to be used to-day.

There was ample room for him inside—if only he

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could be sure that the hasp would not fall back into place and lock him in.

A close examination revealed three screws holding it on, and it took him ten minutes to remove them and slip the hasp into his pocket. Black lead from the grate covered the traces of his work and no one could have told from a casual glance that the loss of the hasp was so recent.

He next arranged the logs so that they would allow him the maximum of movement, and with a final look round he climbed into the chest and drew the lid down over his head.

For the next minute he could see nothing, and he felt that he was suffocating ; his head and shoulders were bowed, and his knees were bent ; any sudden movement would dislodge the logs, and altogether he was convinced that he was acting like a fool.

After that it was not so bad, and when he had raised the lid a fraction of a centimetre with the help of two matchsticks he was delighted. He could now breathe ; he could also see—a little ; and he could definitely hear a great deal, as was shown when the domo blew his nose on the way downstairs.

It remained to be seen whether an accident would reveal his presence.

Gradually the house wakened. Men in shirt-sleeves and aprons, who yawned and moved sluggishly, came to sweep and garnish the rooms. Rugs were lifted, the shining floor was polished with mops, and he had a nerve-racking minute of anxiety when he realized that all the chairs and tables in the room were being moved. In a moment they would come to the

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chest—but they did not. At the time he thought that some miracle of carelessness had saved him ; only later did he discover that the chest was standing on the brick hearth that guarded the fire, and that the parquet could be polished without disturbing it.

A duster was flicked over the top and sides of his cage, and for several minutes a lazy servant used the lid as a seat while he gossiped with his fellows. When he had gone Melrose found that the soft match-sticks had been crushed, and he was once more in almost complete darkness, but he dared not replace them until the sweeping and polishing were done.

His watch was not luminous, but by holding it close to the crack in the lid he was able to read the dial. By half-past seven an ordered quietness reigned once more, and he was able to replace his matches and breathe more freely.

Although he had been in hiding for barely two hours his left leg from the thigh downwards was asleep ; his left elbow was numbed from the weight of his body, and his neck had a crick which he was sure would be permanent. To remain in that state, or even, as was probable, to grow steadily more crippled, would be fatal when the time came for action, and he began to massage himself. Infinite caution was needed, and frequent pauses when some one was in the room, but after a while he grew expert at the job, and was able to keep his limbs supple by a sort of perpetual motion.

The château had returned to a brooding quiet and the hours of waiting passed slowly. By contorting himself he could look through the slit under the lid ; this feat allowed him to see a horizontal section of the

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room stretching from the dining-room door, past the windows and main door to the stairs. The field of vision included a few chairs and two tables, but at one point it was obscured, and he realized that one of the chairs was almost touching the chest.

He could not see who came in from the direction of the kitchens, but he amused himself by listening for their footsteps, and he was soon able to judge where the owner was, even if he could not see him.

No one came downstairs for breakfast, but that was not so surprising in France as it would have been in England, and it was not until nearly eleven that he had his first thrill.

Madame de Lorraine came down the stairs. He knew her by her voice, even before he saw her small grey shoes with their high heels, the grey silk dress which swept to her ankles, and which lifted in a high stiff collar open at her throat. A magnificent emerald clasp pinned the dress over her breast, and a band of some metallic cord, intricately woven, circled her waist like a monk's girdle. Her face he could not see, but her voice was the voice of Paul.

She spoke, of course, in French, pausing occasionally for her companion to answer, which he did in a suave, deferential voice which matched his striped trousers and black coat, and proclaimed him as her secretary.

Her voice, though low, was clear and curiously unhurried ; musical but passionless, and Melrose felt that even if he were to rise suddenly from the chest she would finish her sentence calmly before turning to consider him.

Any mad impulse he may have had to play jack-

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in-the-box was dispelled by the thrill of listening to the instructions she was giving to her secretary.

"My guests will arrive within the hour," she informed him. "Tell Benoit to see to their comfort and to have the wine brought in here."

"They will be . . . how many, madame?"

"Two—and the boy Paul. After the *déjeuner* we shall go to my room, and you will see that we are undisturbed."

"I will attend to it, madame," the secretary bowed, revealing to Melrose his sleek black hair, his sallow face and servile eyes. "Will Monsieur Paul have *déjeuner* with madame?" he added.

"Imbecile!" she retorted, and even Melrose flinched inside his chest, although she had not raised her voice. "We do not eat with children—Benoit will take care of him."

This revelation that his guess had been right made Melrose jubilant, but at the moment he was more concerned with attempting to see madame's face than with completing his plans. She baulked him, however, for at the foot of the stairs, just as her chin was coming into view, she turned and walked across the hall to the front door, with her back to him, and he only knew that her figure was lithe and trim as a girl's and that she carried her head proudly.

The room was empty. Now, surely, was the time to leave the chest, and to hide upstairs, but he was reluctant to desert this vantage point, and while he was debating with himself the opportunity was lost. The secretary returned with Benoit, the domo, who was the same man who had blown his nose so lustily at reveille.

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Melrose could not hear what they were saying, although he guessed that it had to do with the coming visitors. The wine was brought in on a small tray by a footman and placed on a table quite near him. The room was not empty again for the next half hour.

At the end of that time a sudden activity heralded the arrival of the guests. There was the sound of a car drawing up outside the château. Benoit, with two powdered footmen in his train, stalked up to the great door and flung it open to admit madame, Pierre Chenevoix, a broad-shouldered blond giant who could be no other than Strauss—and Paul.

Melrose had eyes for no one but the boy. He looked pale and rather frightened ; he hung back on the threshold as if he were uncertain of his welcome, but otherwise he seemed unharmed by his adventure.

Then two things happened which made Melrose grit his teeth and showed him the kind of mercy Paul might expect from his captors.

Strauss handed his coat and hat to one of the footmen, and was going forward into the hall when he saw that Paul was still wavering on the step. With an oath he turned back and, catching the boy by the scruff of the neck, he pitched him forward with one hand and slammed the door with the other.

Paul gave a little yelp of dismay and picked himself up to find that his mother was watching him. Her face was expressionless, a cold mask which gazed down on him out of unwavering eyes, and then in a voice that might have been his own except that it was drained of all feeling she called on Benoit to remove him.

At her command Benoit came forward and took

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Paul's arm to lead him upstairs while she turned to the table on which stood the wine.

The only comment on the affair was a sneering laugh from Pierre.

"Your motherly instinct does you infinite credit, madame," he said, and as was to be expected she made no reply.

A gentle rustle of silk close to his ear warned Melrose that she had chosen the chair nearest to him ; her hand lying on the arm of the chair and idling with the stem of her wine-glass was so close that he turned away his lips in case she should feel his breath on her fingers.

Pierre did most of the talking. He spoke of the ease with which the boy had been taken and spoke of Marcia with such insolent familiarity that Melrose's fingers itched for his throat.

The two men were obviously surprised to find that the girl had not arrived before them.

"I told you she was to fly straight on after dropping the boy," Strauss growled. "The little fool disobeyed. . . ."

"And I gave her our message," Pierre answered airily, "but the charming Marcia she has—how you say?—an *entêtement* of her own. To order with her is one thing ; to obey another."

For Strauss's benefit the talk was in English. Madame interrupted his angry retort.

"When you are married to her, my Pierre," she said in her calm voice, "I will see that she obeys."

Melrose felt a cold shudder run down his spine. So that, too, was part of their scheme! But why? Marcia married to that sniggering libertine was unthinkable.

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She would never marry him of her own accord . . . but Strauss was speaking.

"She will not come now," he told Pierre.

"She will," Madame answered. "It is to her advantage to come—or so she thinks."

"Suppose they have locked her up?"

"Then she will persuade them that only she can return the boy. They will let her go."

The conviction with which she said it left no room for doubt. Even Melrose knew that that was exactly what would happen, and if he had been in the open he would have expected to see her monoplane overhead.

"When do we talk business?" Strauss asked impatiently. "We have the boy, soon you will have the girl—what I want to know is, when do we touch Thurston's money?"

"We will discuss that later, *mon cher*," madame answered. "You must not be impatient."

"Impatient! When the money's through I'll dump the brat in the river and be done with it."

"That would be very foolish," she replied. "The boy's health is precious—until after his father is dead. My husband will pay me well for his safe return, and he will no doubt give Marcia a fine *dot*, which Pierre will appreciate; but what of the rest of his fortune? That will go to Paul—and you forget that Paul is my son. No, we must be very careful with him until everything is placed in my hands for safe keeping. Then, perhaps . . . ? But who can tell how long the son will live after his father is dead?"

Madame shrugged as if to dismiss a trivial matter.

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Both Pierre and Strauss gasped, and from their looks of blank astonishment it appeared that they were realizing for the first time the full scope of her plans.

To them the abduction must have been a simple matter of ransom, but to Madame the possibilities were infinite. She implied that a man's death was of no account provided that he left his fortune under her control, and she hinted with less than delicacy that she did not intend to share that fortune even with her son.

Melrose felt slightly sick. The appalling callousness of the whole business, and the woman's calm way of stating her fiendish intentions, brought the sweat to his forehead. If he had had a gun he would willingly have shot her down and carried Paul away by force, but he was unarmed, and he dug his nails into the palms of his hands to give himself patience.

Pierre and Strauss recovered from their astonishment and began to laugh like schoolboys, but madame cut short their transports.

"I see you understand the main outline," she said. "We will discuss the details later. Now, let us talk of something else."

And, to set them an example in self-control, she herself talked for the next quarter of an hour of the recent purchase of a painting. She spoke with the eager zest of a collector, and for the first time her voice lost its tonelessness and grew animated. Her knowledge of her subject was as great as her enthusiasm, and it soon grew apparent to Melrose that the château and all it contained was her passion. Pride of possession was the altar at which she worshipped. To keep her household gods intact and to add to their glory, she was prepared

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to rob and pillage, to commit murder, to hold her own son to ransom.

But Melrose grew impatient of listening. He was waiting for *déjeuner* to be announced, and he swore that before they left the dining-room he would have taken Paul out of their clutches. Give him but one minute alone—less than a minute, a few seconds, and he would be on his way to the rescue.

Madame's voice, Pierre's laugh, and the clink of decanter on glass were getting on his nerves. Surely a servant must come soon to tell them that the meal was ready. . . .

“ Madame is served ! ”

The blessed words came at last. There was a scraping of feet as the men stood up ; madame's hand in which she held her glass disappeared from his view. Soon, in less than a minute, the room would be free except for the servants going to and from the kitchen ; they would be easy to avoid . . . Pierre and Strauss were waiting for madame ; the butler stood by the dining-room door waiting to usher them in, but she did not move. Why ! In heaven's name, why !

It was such a small reason.

She was finishing her drink ; and when she had drained it, she put the empty glass down on the lid of the chest.

CHAPTER 8 : FOUR MEN GO TO SLEEP

MELROSE heard the ring of the glass above his head, and saw madame and her friends go into the dining-room like a man in a dream. He was alone, the moment for which he had been praying was come—and he could not move. The need for silence had impressed itself so deeply in his mind that that slender glass poised so delicately on the smooth oak lid held him prisoner more surely than the strongest lock. One small upward push and it would go slithering across the board to break in musical fragments on the hearth. The noise would not be so very great, but in his excited imagination it already rang through the house like a death knell.

But the chance was passing. Something had to be done. Once madame came from the dining-room opportunity would be gone.

He gritted his teeth and placed the flat of his hand against the lid ; perhaps, if he pushed very gently, he could raise it enough for him to slide out and keep the glass intact . . . three inches, four, and still there was no slithering rush. He was beginning to hope . . . and then footsteps warned him that a servant was coming from the kitchen. He had to lower the lid.

The man was wheeling a dinner wagon piled high with dishes. Once he was gone the coast would be clear for a second attempt.

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The dining-room door closed. His hand moved upwards, but once more he had to lower the lid in despair. Some one else was coming ; this time, down the main stairs.

It was the secretary, and Melrose, waiting in an agony of impatience, saw that he was in no hurry to leave. He was moving about the room with little clucking noises and seemed to be straightening the cushions and ordering the chairs. Of all the maddening things that could have happened this was the worst. It was not a secretary's business to fuss about in this way. What was the domo for—and then he remembered that Benoit was looking after Paul.

He breathed impotent curses. Surely the man couldn't fiddle around for ever. The servant returned with his trolley to the kitchen. Five minutes at least must pass before he was summoned with the next course. Now would be the time ; if only . . . suddenly his curses turned to a benediction. The striped trousers moved in his direction, they brushed against the chest, and a moment later the glass was back on the tray.

The secretary was satisfied with his handiwork. He was going, and all would have been well if a log, tired of maintaining a precarious balance under Melrose's knee, had not chosen that particular moment to roll off its perch with a dull thud.

The secretary wheeled in his tracks and stood motionless. His eyes were bulging with surprise. But Melrose was no longer watching him through the slit ; he was drawing up his leg and crouching for the spring.

His shoe made a slithering noise on the bottom of the

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chest ; understanding crept back into the secretary's eye, and, thinking to surprise a mouse or a rat at its work, he tiptoed forward and flung up the lid.

Melrose came to his feet in one swaying motion, and his hands gripped his victim's throat ; there was a slight clatter as the lid swung against the wall, one frantic tap of the secretary's shoe against the chest, and the man hung limply on his hands.

Bending down, he swept the man's feet from under him and laid him in the chest ; a glance reassured him that though the fellow lived he had lost interest in life for a considerable time, thanks to a pair of expert thumbs, and he closed the lid carefully before hurrying up the stairs.

His feet made no sound on the thick carpet, and he took the stairs three at a time. Both the first and second landings were deserted, and a few seconds later his ear was close to the keyhole of Paul's room.

At first he could hear nothing, but then a muffled sob told him that Paul was there ; it told him, too, that the boy was alone, for he knew him well enough to be sure that he would not break down in front of strangers.

A quick glance down the passage assured him that they were alone, and he tapped lightly on the door. The sobbing ceased, and he tapped again, then put his lips to the keyhole.

"Paul," he whispered. "It's John!"

There was a glad cry, quickly stifled, and the sound of feet running to the door.

"Hush!" John cautioned. "You are alone, aren't you?"

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"Yes," the boy breathed, and John noticed the catch in his throat as he controlled a sob.

"Have they fed you yet?" he asked.

"No. The man has gone for something. He will be back any minute."

"Splendid! Be ready to take the tray from him when he comes in—then keep away from the door. I will deal with him."

"Do you mean . . . you'll rescue me?" the boy thrilled.

"As sure as eggs go rotten, I will," John promised cheerfully, and then in an altered tone, "Look out! He's coming."

He had heard a creak from the direction of the back stairs, and rose swiftly to his feet. Once already the room next to Paul had proved a refuge, and he entered it now. This time he did not close the door, but left a slit through which he could keep watch.

He had not long to wait. He heard a heavy tread top the stairs and then a tray came round the corner, followed by Benoit himself. The man looked the gaoler he was. Six foot of hulking strength topped by a square-jawed sullen face. "More like a professional thrower-out than a major-domo," was Melrose's unspoken comment, and his eyes narrowed as he realized that he would have to act with deadly speed if he was to subdue him before he could give the alarm.

Benoit was doing his duty with leisurely thoroughness. First he placed the tray on the ground, then he drew the key from his pocket and unlocked the door. Half opening it, he warned Paul of what would happen to him if he played any tricks, and he moved the key

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from the outside to the inside of the door. Only then did he stoop for the tray, and, pushing the door wider open with his foot, he entered the room.

This was Melrose's cue. He slipped from his hiding-place and followed as noiselessly as a cat. He was in time to see Paul come forward for the tray, but Benoit brushed the boy aside and set it down on the table.

"Never mind, Paul," Melrose said cheerfully. "Just lock the door, will you?"

At the sound of his voice the man spun round with a snarl. He tried to pick up a knife from the table, and he was still trying when John's first blow ripped like a thunderbolt into the pit of his stomach. The second, timed to perfection, swung with the crack of a pistol, shot to his jaw, and his head jerked back as if it had been caught in a hangman's noose.

That was the end, his body sagged against the table and would have fallen had not John caught him by his shirt front. Merciless blue eyes considered him, a wrist like a vice held him on his feet and dragged him towards the bed.

"Just one more," John murmured softly, "to teach you not to play with knives."

He turned Benoit round so that he was facing the bed, and then letting go his hold he swung the edge of his hand into the back of the man's neck.

"And that should be that," he sighed as the heavy body pitched forward on to the bed.

"You've killed him!" Paul whispered, and John turned to find the boy staring with wide eyes at the sprawling figure.

Melrose set a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder.

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"No such luck," he smiled reassuringly. "That tap wasn't quite Queensberry, but you needn't worry about him. He'll be sore in three places when he wakes, and as he only has two hands he won't know which to rub—apart from that he'll feel fine!"

Paul who had been trembling like a frightened colt was comforted by the casual voice and the lazy eyes which smiled down on him with such easy confidence.

"I expect he'll wonder what hit him," he said shakily.

"That's the spirit!" John encouraged him, "and now we'll take a look out of the window just to see what sort of a day it is. . . ."

With his hand still on Paul's shoulder he strolled across the room. He knew that vital seconds were slipping away, but the lad would need all his nerve when they left this room, and he dared not hurry him.

The courtyard into which they looked through barred windows was deserted.

"Do you think you can walk across that yard with me?" Melrose asked. "Without turning your head? Just as if we were strolling up to the stables to look at the horses?"

Paul gulped and nodded bravely.

"Good lad!" John said. "Once we're in those woods near the ruins we're safe."

He pulled out his handkerchief and waved it up and down in front of the window.

"Why did you do that?" Paul whispered.

"To show Bob Anderson that we are coming. . . ."

"Do you mean that Bob is here too?" Paul asked excitedly, and John saw that his eyes were shining.

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"Sure thing," he answered as he stuffed his handkerchief back in his pocket. "Bob's the good fairy waiting to lead us to safety—and now, if you are ready, I think we'd better be off before friend Benoit wakes up."

Paul slipped his hand into John's, and together they crossed the room to the door.

"Remember," Melrose cautioned. "Silent as a ghost till we are out of the house, then look as if you were enjoying yourself. Let me do any talking that's necessary. All set for the getaway?"

"All set, John!" Paul answered confidently.

They smiled at each other and John's heart lifted when he saw the lad's complete trust in him. The spirit of adventure was on them both, and with a final squeeze of the boy's hand he opened the door.

There was nobody in sight. The house seemed to be sleeping under the sun, and they stole along the passage and down the stairs.

During his early morning tour of inspection Melrose had discovered a door at the farther end of the library which opened into a gun-room, which in turn led into a second and smaller hall at the back of the house. On one side of this hall was a cloak-room, on the other a door leading to the kitchens, and straight ahead was the back door which led to the courtyard.

This door was his goal. If they reached there unobserved he believed that they had a fair chance of escape, and as they crept down from the first landing he peered over the banisters to see whether the main hall was clear.

It was. Although hours seemed to have passed

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since his brief encounter with the secretary, the actual time could not have been more than a few minutes, and he doubted whether the servant had even been summoned with his trolley for the second course.

That doubt was almost their undoing.

With Paul's hand in his he went down the remaining stairs, and they were half-way across the hall when the dining-room door opened.

Had the man not been behind his wagon he must have seen them. As it was, the moment's delay was sufficient for Melrose to dive down behind a couch and to pull Paul headlong beside him. They lay, scarcely breathing, while the servant passed slowly across the hall towards the screen. Melrose knew that although the couch hid them for the first part of his journey, they were in full view for the second half, and if the servant turned his head before passing behind the screen the game was up.

Not daring to move, he lay with his arm round Paul and a prickling of the hairs in the nape of his neck. It seemed impossible that the man would pass by unheeding, and when he paused by the screen Melrose felt sure that they had been discovered and his muscles tensed for a last desperate bid.

Had he but known it the man was already behind the screen when he paused, and the next moment the sound of a door closing signalled their escape.

"Now's the time," he breathed in Paul's ear, and a few seconds later they had gained the security of the library.

"Fun and games!" he laughed softly as Paul's hand crept back into his. "How are you feeling, old son?"

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"Fine!" Paul whispered. "But that was a narrow squeak!"

"It surely was! That fellow made my hair stand on end. And now for the second round. Remember that from now on we are not escaping prisoners but a couple of guests taking a look round. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Then here goes!"

He opened the far door with a gay flourish and they stepped into the second hall. It was deserted, and their feet rang boldly on the stone floor as they crossed it.

"Luck's with us," John murmured as they stepped out into the sunshine. The cobbled yard was empty, and though he had no doubt that they were overlooked from behind, he strolled across with every appearance of confidence.

"Quaint spot, isn't it?" he asked Paul in French. "You'll love madame's horses. I'll choose one for you to ride, and you can choose one for me. How'll that do?"

He looked down to see how Paul was standing the strain; but he need not have worried. The boy was as game as they are made, and though he must have been itching to look over his shoulder he kept his eyes fixed ahead and his step steady.

So, with John talking easily and pointing with his free hand to the various buildings, they passed under the wide arch that led into the courtyard, and they both felt relieved—as if a curtain had fallen behind their backs.

On their left was the covered cloister down which Melrose had tiptoed in the early hours of the morning,

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and he pointed it out gaily. Everything was going swimmingly. They had not been challenged. Soon they would be through the second arch, and the trees would be less than a hundred yards away. . . .

His rejoicing was rudely shattered by the hum of an aeroplane. It was coming from the direction of Poitiers—the way which Anderson and he had come yesterday—and it was flying fast. His eyes lifted anxiously to the ridge of hills, but he did not have to see the aeroplane to know who was the pilot nor why it was coming. Somehow, Marcia had broken her bonds, and was rushing with open throttle and screaming wings to warn madame of his presence. Within ten minutes . . .

The monoplane appeared, a bare two hundred feet above the ridge—black wings, gleaming silver body, open cockpits—his last doubts were resolved, and as it swept overhead the engine was cut out ready for the glide down into the landing field, a short half-mile down the valley.

John frowned. Both Paul and he had instinctively stopped when the monoplane passed overhead, but now he lowered his eyes intending to hurry their bid for safety. Time had become increasingly precious—but as his glance returned to earth he received a second shock.

One of the château servants was standing on the path in front of them. He was eyeing them suspiciously, and it was evident that he was not going to let them go past without an argument.

He was dressed in the leggings and livery of a chauffeur, a dapper little man with an intelligent face, and

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as Melrose advanced he stepped backwards out of range. He was taking no risks, and the way his eyes darted from side to side showed that he was ready to call for help at the first sign of violence.

The only way was to bluff him.

"You are Madame de Lorraine's chauffeur?" Melrose asked.

The man nodded warily.

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind guiding us to the stables?" Melrose added. "We understand that they are somewhere around. Monsieur Paul and I are strangers here and . . ."

"I drove the boy here this morning," the man replied, "but I do not remember monsieur?"

John laughed. He had recognized the voice as the voice of Henri. The little man seemed doomed to get in his way and to meet trouble at the end of the journey.

"Of course you don't," he answered. "I came much earlier—by myself. And now be a good fellow and show us the way."

"Why aren't you at *déjeuner* with the others?" was the man's retort, and his insolent manner provoked Melrose to wrath.

"Listen, Henri," he said with a dangerous quietness before which the little man wilted, "since when have madame's guests had to account to you for their actions? Are you going to show me those stables or do I have to drag you by the scruff of the neck to the house? Madame will be glad to hear what I have to say."

Fear came into Henri's eyes. John's knowledge of his name, his threat, his own knowledge of his mis-

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tress's treatment of servants who annoyed her, all combined to convince him that he had made a grievous mistake, and without a moment's hesitation he did all in his power to avoid retribution. His insolent stare turned to an ingratiating smile ; he was galvanized to immediate action, and, demanding a thousand pardons with a wealth of humble gestures, he begged them to follow him.

John winked at Paul, and they followed the twinkling gaiters under the second arch and round to the right.

A row of loose boxes from which looked several horses showed that madame kept a full stable, but Melrose was more interested in the rest of his surroundings.

There were the trees which they had to reach, and, beyond them, the ruins where Anderson would be waiting.

He looked over his shoulder. A car was standing outside the open doors of a garage on the other side of the arch. Hose-pipe and brushes seemed to show that Henri had just knocked off work and was going to his lunch when they met him. There was no other sign of life. The little man must have been the last to leave, which was going to prove rather hard luck on him.

John tapped him on the shoulder and held out a pound note in his other hand.

"It's English and it's good, Henri," he assured him. "I always reward an honest servant even if he, through no fault of his own, goes to sleep . . ."

Before the astonished Henri knew what was happening a swift uppercut smacked on the point of his chin, and he subsided on to the ground. One wide-

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stretched hand was still clutching the note, and his expression was peaceful: the blow had been too sudden for fear to register.

" . . . on duty ! " Melrose completed his sentence, and turned to Paul.

" I have a feeling that our passing will be remembered at Château Blanc," he grinned, " and the sooner we reach the tall timber the better. Come on ! "

He set off at a steady run for the trees, and Paul bounded happily alongside. The need for caution was over. Speed and staying power were the essentials now.

Gravel and grass gave way to pine needles, and they felt the welcome shade as they went under the trees.

" Steady up ! " Melrose called as the gradient increased. " We've a long pull and you'll need all your wind."

He dropped to a walk, and they climbed steadily towards the ruins, but before they had covered half the distance a burly figure stepped out from behind a tree.

" Bob ! " Paul cried gladly and rushed to meet him.

Anderson's great arms encircled him and tossed him up in the air as if he had been a feather.

" It's great to see you, youngster ! " he said, running his fingers through the boy's hair.

" Did you see John wave ? " Paul asked eagerly.

" I did." Anderson nodded. " That wave set my heart beating again, although I doubt if it will ever be the heart it was. I thought you were done last night," he said to Melrose. " The row that fellow made curdled my blood."

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"He's peacefully asleep now down by the stables," John answered.

"Was that the same man?"

"The very same—our dear little Henri, always turning up at the wrong moment."

"This way," Anderson said. They had started to climb at once with Paul between them, and he now struck off at an angle across the slope. He, too, had seen and heard the aeroplane, and he knew that there was no time to lose. Gossip and reminiscence could wait, and after the first greeting only the essential was spoken.

"See anything of François?" Melrose asked over Paul's head.

"Not a thing—but I heard him. He was trailing me. I tried to catch him out, but he was too clever for me."

"He's a woodsman," Melrose answered, "and is probably watching us now. Do you suppose he suspects?"

"Who wouldn't? Our tale was too thin to deceive an idiot for long."

"Well, I'm quite sure he had said nothing to madame by the time we left," Melrose said with conviction.

"Perhaps he's damaged the 'plane?"

"Not likely. Short of breaking it up he wouldn't know how, and I don't think he'd dare smash it on his own responsibility. No, an ambush is more in his line."

After that they were silent, and the two men peered into every shadow and listened to every sound. Paul, as if he knew that silence was the only way he could

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help, walked between them with tight shut lips and roving eyes. The pace they set was easy, and he was determined not to be a drag on the hands that held him.

Anderson guided them by gesture, and Melrose knew that he must have been up and down this path several times in the early hours of the morning. He never hesitated once, and the track along which he led them was always under the shadow of the trees. Sunlight came through and dappled them with golden gleams, the pine needles were scented and soft to their feet, and not once was the gradient so steep that their shoes failed to grip.

"Grand staff work," he muttered once. "How much farther to the top?"

"Another five minutes," Anderson answered. "Had to come this long way round. We strike François's path at the . . ."

The sentence never ended. He saw Melrose stiffen, and then he too heard the warning rustle.

"Let them go through the middle!" Melrose shouted, his arm already round Paul's waist to whisk him to one side.

The warning was timely. Even as Melrose spoke, four men sprang from behind the trees where they had been hiding, and rushed down on them. The front one was François, and as he came he swung a huge stick which whistled within an inch of Melrose's head.

The impetus of his rush carried him down the hill. The other three men, meeting with no resistance, followed, but their rush was not so savage, and they were already wheeling to the attack when Anderson

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leapt among them. His great fist shot out into the nearest face, and with a scream of agony the man crashed backwards head over heels down the hill. The other two, grown suddenly wise, stepped away and whirled their sticks ; with one on either side of him Anderson had no chance, and although he ducked when he saw the blow coming it caught him across the shoulders and knocked him down. With a shout of triumph the rogue stepped forward to finish him, but the blow never fell. Melrose, who had been hampered by Paul, leapt under the raised stick and hit him with all his strength behind the ear. The man crashed against a tree trunk as if he had been pole-axed and then lay still.

Anderson was already on his feet, and the last man, seeing the odds against him, dropped his stick and fled. Melrose, who was nearest, sprang in pursuit and would have caught him had he not been stopped by a terrible oath from Anderson.

He whipped round and was in time to see François, who had taken no part in the battle after his first mad charge, come up behind Paul and gather him into his arms.

Anderson's yell of warning came too late. Paul had been watching the battle, his back to the tree against which Melrose had set him, and he was caught unawares. He struggled like a fury in the man's grasp, but François quietened him with a vicious blow on the head, and throwing him over his shoulder he set off down the hill at a run.

With a sobbing curse for allowing the heat of battle to make him forget the boy, Melrose rushed in pursuit.

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François plunged straight down the hill with his burden. In spite of this handicap the man lumbered down the hill with the sure-footedness of an elephant. He dodged between trees, saved himself as by a miracle from falling and kept his lead.

Anderson, who was leading the chase five yards in front of Melrose, was not used to this sort of running. He hung doggedly to the man's trail, blundering into trees which his quarry for all his seeming clumsiness side-stepped with ease ; he did not lose ground, but he did not gain, and he knew that nothing short of a headlong fall by François could bring him level with the man in time.

Melrose had been farther away when the chase started, but he was of a lighter build, and anger lent him wings. He rushed down the hill, outdistancing his friend and closing in on François. He knew that every step down had to be regained, and that even if the alarm had not been given before, the shouting would soon bring the hive about their ears.

François was still three yards ahead, pounding along with a tireless stride, and already they were more than half-way down the hill. Half in despair and half with the idea of frightening the man, he let out a tremendous yell.

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Then for the first time François faltered ; he looked over his shoulder and Melrose chose that moment to make a desperate spurt which brought him alongside. François swerved, and he shot past ; but the man was headed, and as Melrose clutched a tree to stop his headlong rush, François dropped Paul and shot off at right angles. Anderson who was on his heels gave chase, his eyes glaring at the man's back, his fingers ready to throttle him unmercifully, his one idea to kill.

"Stop!" Melrose yelled. "We haven't time!"

Anderson appeared not to notice, and he knelt down beside Paul. The boy's face was bleeding and he was white. His stillness was terrifying.

"Paul!" Melrose called softly, while he staunched the blood and ran his hands over the limp body. A lump was swelling on his forehead. It made him hope that the lad was only stunned, and, sure enough, he opened his eyes after a few moments and smiled weakly.

"Thank God!" John murmured. Paul looked at him vacantly for a moment and then put his hand to his head.

"I hit something," he said.

"Lie still, old son. . . ."

"Where's Bob? Oughtn't we to be going?" Paul asked.

"He'll be back," John smiled. "Give yourself time, Paul lad. No need to rush things."

As he spoke, Anderson returned. He was very much out of breath, and his grim face showed that he had not made his kill.

"How is he?" he panted.

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"Two bumps on the head," Melrose answered. "One where that swine hit him, the other from a tree. He'll be all right in a few minutes. Do you think you could cling on to my back?" he asked Paul, after a few moments.

"I can walk!"

"There's no need. Just cling on to my back until the giddiness goes. Hoist him up, will you, Bob?"

Anderson did as he was asked, and they set off up the hill again. None of them spoke. They knew that the odds which had been so high in their favour were now heavy against them. The hill was to climb all over again. They were tired. Both the men had had sleepless nights, and Anderson had had nothing to eat since the previous evening. To add to their difficulties, Paul, in spite of his courage, was a dead weight on John's shoulder, and as a final trial they could still hear François yelling for help as hard as he could. His voice grew fainter and fainter as he charged down the hill. It was only a matter of minutes before he reached the bottom and told his story to all who cared to listen.

The blood pounded in John's temples. Even his iron muscles and wide lungs were feeling the strain. His heart slammed in his breast, but he dared not stop. Every breath he took hurt his chest, and his knees refused to straighten.

"I've got my second wind," Anderson said. He had been watching John's struggle, but had said nothing until he had recovered from his chase of François.
"Let me take the boy."

"I can walk," Paul protested weakly.

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"Sure you can, later, when it's most needed," Anderson assured him.

Melrose transferred his burden.

"There's a stream on the other side," he said to Paul. "A drink and a dab on that lump will make a new man of you."

They made better progress now. Anderson had a bull's strength and he whipped himself to endure to the utmost. Besides, he had heard the first cries of pursuit, which Melrose had not heard because of the blood pounding in his ears. The cries were a long way off, but mingled with them was the sound of a bell. John heard it too, now that his breath was coming more freely.

"The chase is on," he gasped, "but we'll do it yet." He knew that the strain of carrying Paul must be telling on Anderson in spite of his magnificent strength. The pace he was setting was terrific. Even unburdened, it was as much as he could do to keep up.

"I can see the top," John encouraged him. "Like me to take over again?"

Anderson shook his head.

"You've got to fly . . . the darned . . . aeroplane," he gasped.

Melrose knew that he was right. Taking off down the glade would be no easy job—but even as he thought about it there came another fear, two fears crowding on top of each other. Suppose François had wrecked the 'plane? What chance would they have of avoiding the pack that was howling on their heels? Or alternatively what would madame do when François told

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her that they had a 'plane hidden by the clearing? What would he himself do in her place?

He was too tired to think. He could only hope that they would be in time.

"Here's the top," he said. "Do you think you could walk now, Paul? We'll hold your hands."

"Of course I can walk," Paul answered, and his voice had regained its strength.

Melrose steadied him as he slid down from Anderson's back. His knees were shaky, and the giddiness returned, but John saw him clench his teeth.

"It's getting better," Paul told him.

"Try yourself out," John said, "while Bob's getting his breath."

Anderson, who had taken the last rise of the hill with a rush, was bent double. Every breath came in a sobbing gasp. He had walked himself to a standstill, and Melrose wisely called a halt.

He was sure that they had outdistanced the pursuit, or had at least kept sufficient lead to allow them to reach the 'plane several minutes ahead.

A minute passed. He heard the shouts of the beaters drawing nearer, and another sound which worried him more. Somewhere down in the valley a car whirred. He guessed that it was going to the flying field; but what then? Once he was in the air surely he would be safe. They could not be meaning to chase him. . . . Then he remembered Strauss . . . guns? Oh, surely they would not try to wing him!

"I'm all right now," Anderson said. "Sorry to have held up the party!"

"So am I," Paul sang out.

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"Then here goes," Melrose answered with a cheerfulness he did not feel. "Think you can find that path, Anderson?"

"Yes, more to our left. We'll strike it over the brow."

They linked hands, and now that there was no more climbing their progress was more rapid. They found the path as Anderson had promised, and each completed zigzag restored their confidence.

"What's that?" Anderson asked suddenly.

"Aeroplane," Melrose answered laconically. He did not add that he was afraid of what would happen when they were in the air. The Percival Gull was fast, but its engine was cold, whereas Marcia's monoplane had only just come in from a long flight. Even at this distance he recognized the sound of the motor.

They were down the hill, and the sound of water reminded him of his promise to Paul. He pulled out his handkerchief and stuffed it in the boy's hands.

"Bob'll tell you where to drink," he said; "and tie a wet handkerchief round your head. I'm going to the 'plane; don't be long!"

He ran on ahead and came suddenly into the glade. The "Gull" was there, its blue wings spread for flight, and the sight of it renewed his hope. He could hear the other 'plane, a faint hum from the other side of the hill, and though the hum was growing louder he refused to listen.

Quickly and efficiently he did what had to be done: Petrol turned on; cabin open for the others when they came; propeller swung over . . .

Here they came. With a single lift he swung the boy into the cockpit and motioned to Anderson to follow.

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"Switch—throttle," he pointed out to Paul.
"Remember what to do? I have swung her over."

Paul nodded and Melrose went back to the nose. The hum from the other aeroplane had grown to a roar and then had mysteriously ceased, but he was past caring about that. His one aim was to get off the ground as smoothly and sweetly as possible.

"Contact!" Paul's young voice called clearly.

"Contact!" he muttered and swung the blade.

At the third attempt the engine started with a stammering roar, and the 'plane surged forward slightly before Paul throttled down. Melrose had swung her as usual from behind the propeller—which was lucky, he thought grimly, for the wheels were not chocked and he would probably have been killed.

He climbed into the cockpit and Paul slid into the next seat. The sun beat down on them, and he was thankful. It meant that the engine would not be stone cold.

"I can't help it if she bursts," he thought savagely.
"We've got to go—now."

Hands and feet steadied on the controls. He felt for the throttle and looked down the glade. The engine roared and they began to move with gathering speed.

All at once a shadow crossed the sun, and he saw an aeroplane drop into the clearing ahead. It swerved violently on landing and taxied straight to the mouth of the glade, where it came slowly towards him—an impassable barrier, denying them the road to freedom.

A wave of helplessness surged over Melrose. He

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cut out his engine and watched the two machines drift closer together up the length of the glade.

Failure by so few seconds robbed him of the power of thought. Those seconds might have been saved a hundred times over. He had been so sure of himself ; he had strolled when he ought to have run ; had paused to laugh when he ought to have been hurrying away from the château.

Now Paul would be retaken and madame would not let him slip through her hands a second time. . . .

He looked again at Marcia's black and silver monoplane which barred his way. The girl had been too quick for him, and he cursed her bitterly. That any one should plot so relentlessly against a child was the lowest form of sin. . . .

A sudden vision of what capture would mean to Paul released a last reserve of strength, and his brain clicked back in order. He vowed that not until Paul was actually in their hands would he admit defeat.

The aeroplanes had rolled to within fifty feet of each other. His own had stopped, but theirs was still coming closer, and he made a quick decision.

"Will you cover our retreat, Bob ?" he asked.
"The woods are Paul's only chance."

Anderson nodded and Melrose climbed to the ground.

They heard a shout from the other 'plane, but Bob caught Paul in his arms and dropped him down to Melrose, who dived straight for the cover of the trees. A bullet thudded into a trunk behind him, but although he heard several more shots he knew they were safe for the present.

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"We must make towards the river," he panted as he set Paul down and took his hand. "With luck we shall get out of the valley before they close the entrance. How's your head?"

"Fine," Paul answered. "The bandage has stopped the ache."

"Can you manage to run for a while? We don't want that fellow with the gun to take any more pot-shots at us."

Paul's answer was to break into an eager trot, and very soon they were out of reach of pursuit from behind.

Anderson, instead of following them into the woods, walked straight up to the other aeroplane which had stopped as soon as the occupants saw Melrose's intention. He was too late to prevent them shooting, and the sound made him see red, so that when a man started to climb over the side he leapt on him in a mad fury. With one hand on the man's throat he smashed his other fist into his face, driving him back against the body of the aeroplane so that his head pushed a hole in the fabric. The man was François, and with a final vicious punch, which broke most of his teeth, he left him to slide to the ground. A second man, whom he guessed to be Strauss, was climbing from the 'plane, and he rushed at him, bringing him down with a flying tackle, and rolling over and over as he fought to reach his throat. He was vaguely aware of a third figure dancing around on the outskirts of the battle, but he had his work cut out to deal with Strauss. The rogue fought grimly, and several times was within an inch of picking up the gun which had dropped from his

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hand during the first assault, but Anderson had the strength of despair, and at last had him pinned on his back, both hands at his throat.

He was throttling him without mercy, and he felt a fierce exultation as his thumbs sank deeper and deeper into the fleshy throat ; then the butt of a pistol thudded on the back of his head, and he pitched forward with a groan. Twice more the pistol rose and fell, but he was already unconscious, his body sprawling with loose limbs in the sunlight of the glade.

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For five minutes after their escape Melrose and Paul ran steadily through the forest, then Melrose called a halt.

He leaned against a tree with Paul beside him, and they listened for their pursuers. They could hear no one behind them, and Melrose concluded that Anderson had done his job well. But on the right, and apparently nearing the bottom of the ridge, they heard men calling to each other.

"We shall have to cross the glade and make for the left-hand ridge," he whispered to Paul. "No need to run, but try not to step on any dry twigs."

They set off again, bearing steadily to the left, and came to the glade up which Melrose had flown on his way to the clearing. To cross this glade would mean exposing themselves to view, and Melrose made Paul wait while he went forward to see whether it was being watched.

Lying on his stomach, he wriggled to the edge of the trees. He could see as far as the valley to his right and almost to the clearing on the left. On both sides the

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glade appeared to be empty, and, signalling to Paul to follow him, he crawled across the opening.

He expected at any moment to hear a warning shout, but none came, and when they got to their feet he decided that their best chance lay in keeping as close to the glade as possible. In this way he hoped that he would have warning of their pursuers.

They had hardly covered another hundred yards before he was justified. A man broke cover about half a mile in front and stood gazing up the glade. He had obviously been told to play sentinel. Another man joined him a few seconds later, paused for a moment to speak to him, and then crossed over into the forest on their side.

Melrose did not wait to see any more. He knew that the woods ended somewhere near where the sentinel was standing, and that if they did not win clear of the trees before the cordon was complete they would be trapped.

With Paul's hand in his he set off again, bearing once more to the left away from the glade. An occasional shout from the far side warned him that the beaters were closing in, and in his heart he knew that he was fighting a forlorn battle. Paul, weakened and shaken by his tumble, was beginning to falter ; he himself was no longer fresh—it was hopeless to run the gauntlet of those open fields, and even as he was admitting that grim truth he heard a shout from straight ahead.

For a second he thought that they had been seen, and he froze to immobility, but then he knew that it was only a beater keeping in touch with his fellows, and he swerved desperately still farther to the left.

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One slender chance remained. They must try to climb the enclosing spur. Once over that they would be safe.

The forest now was no longer of pine trees. In places there were scarcely any trees at all, but instead close growing undergrowth and briars which clung to their clothing and tore at their hands. Progress was tiring, speed impossible, but Melrose plodded on doggedly with Paul stumbling at his heels. The ground began to rise and the trees to thin out still more. They had reached the foot of the spur, and as they began to climb Melrose felt his hopes rising. The shouts of their pursuers were getting closer; but here was the hill, they were already fifty feet above the floor of the valley, soon they would be looking down on it from several hundred—but hope was not destined to buoy them up for long.

The growth through which they were breaking thinned abruptly, and instead of earth under their feet there was rock.

The sight that confronted them nearly broke their hearts.

For a few yards the outcrop of rock climbed at an easy gradient, but then it rose sheer as a wall and almost as smooth for thirty feet. On top of the wall trees were growing, which proved that once they had scaled the rock they would be safe. But to scale that wall was quite impossible. Melrose, had he been alone, might have tried, and would probably have broken his neck; with Paul, he did not even consider the attempt.

The wall stretched unbroken for several hundred

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yards to either side, and though in places there seemed to be footholds and crevices which would lead them up, he knew that by the time he had found a place which Paul could use the chase would be over.

Nothing seemed to be left but to resign themselves to the inevitable. They might hide—but what good would that do? Except in this corner of the woods there was no undergrowth. Any one moving between the pine trees could be seen a hundred yards away, and once their pursuers had made sure that the pine forest was empty they would comb this undergrowth. They knew, of course, that the ridge where he and Paul were standing was virtually unclimbable, and by now they would have blocked all the exits into the valley.

Melrose put his arm round the boy's shoulder.

"Are you game for one more effort?" he asked gently. "If we can hide till it's dark we may easily break through the cordon. . . ."

"Of course I am," Paul assured him, and Melrose felt his own courage lift in response.

"The undergrowth's no good," he said. "They'll beat it flat, but it is just possible they won't climb every tree to see whether we're hiding in a bird's nest! What do you think of that oak over there?"

"It looks big enough!"

"And thick enough," Melrose answered as they ploughed their way back through the undergrowth.

Two minutes later they were standing beneath the oak and peering up into the branches. Little sunlight penetrated the thatch of leaves, and Melrose knew that short of climbing the tree it would be impossible to tell whether any one was above.

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"Up you go," he whispered to Paul.

The first branch was a good seven feet from the ground, and it was so fat that Paul had great difficulty in pulling himself up from Melrose's back. He managed it at last, and Melrose waved him up higher while he prepared to follow. Twice he failed to get a sufficient grip with his fingers, but the third time he succeeded and swung his leg over the bough. Paul beckoned excitedly from a perch fifteen feet above Melrose's head, and when he clambered up he found him tucked cosily in a fork where he was quite out of sight of the ground.

"There's room for you on that branch," Paul whispered, and John stretched himself out along the bough, his legs one on either side of Paul to prevent him slipping. The position was not very comfortable, but perhaps he would be able to move when the search-party was gone. He slipped off his coat and handed it to Paul.

"Use that as a cushion," he said. "I want you to have as much rest as you can."

"What about you?" Paul asked, his black eyes peering upwards, and the white handkerchief across his forehead shining in a patch of sunlight.

"I can rest like a horse—standing up," Melrose answered.

He settled his head against the bough and looked at his watch: it was barely half-past three. Little more than twenty-four hours ago he had been flying above English fields while he waited for Paul to do his latest "trick," and now, as a result of that trick, here they were stuck up in a tree while men searched for them in a French forest.

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Somewhere, also in the forest, was Bob Anderson, unless he had been captured—or killed. The bullet that had struck the tree while Melrose and Paul were escaping was sufficient reminder of the ruthlessness of the enemy, and Melrose remembered now that there had been sounds of a violent struggle. He could do no more than hope that Anderson had escaped—and to vow that if he had been murdered he would not rest until he had killed the murderer.

Nearly five hours to wait for darkness. Already his eyelids felt as if they were weighted with lead. He knew that once his eyes were shut no effort of will would serve to open them until he had had the sleep which mind and body craved. Above him was the cool canopy of leaves through which the sunlight filtered ; it covered him with golden lace and hypnotized him, so that in self-defence he had to turn his head and look down towards the ground.

The searchers were so close that he could hear their heavy feet trampling the bushes. As far as he could gather they had formed into a line, and were armed with sticks. Their progress was slow, and by that he knew that the search was thorough. Every now and then coarse laughter floated up to him or a loud malediction when some one met with a mischance. At length the search spread out under the tree ; some one whacked the trunk petulantly and cursed the *sales Anglais* who were giving them this trouble—but not one of them looked up. Gradually the sounds ceased, and he knew that for the time being they were safe.

With the passing of danger his nerves relaxed ; he would have given a fortune for one cigarette, and

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frequently he had to move his head to keep himself awake. Once the afternoon quiet was broken by the roar of an aeroplane, and he caught a distant gleam of silver. The bird of prey was returning to its lair. He followed the sound : now it was flying over the ridge ; now it must be approaching the landing field—yes, the engine cut out. It was surprising how much one could hear if one really listened. Now it must be on the ground, and he listened for the car. He thought he heard it, but maybe that was imagination, and silence dropped heavily round him again.

The searchers returned. They were dispirited and quarrelsome ; as their voices dwindled he wondered what the next move would be ? Left to themselves these men would go back to the château, but he knew that they would not be left to themselves. Madame and her two henchmen must even then be planning. . . .

His head dropped and he was only wakened in time by Paul who swayed against his knee. Another second and they must both have fallen. The shock roused him thoroughly, and he set himself grimly to keep watch over the sleeping boy.

With maddening deliberation the sun sloped towards the west. He watched the pools of light creep higher up the trunk of the tree until only the top branches caught the sun and were crowned with gold. Soon even the crown was gone, and he knew that the sun had fallen behind the ridge.

After another hour it began to grow cold, and he wakened the boy.

Paul was stiff and hungry. He stared down into the sombre wood with wide, startled eyes, but Melrose's

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voice reassured him, and when they had freed their muscles as well as they could Melrose led the way back to the ground.

There was still enough light to allow them to see the easiest way through the undergrowth, and after a quarter of an hour of hard going they were back in the pine wood.

The going was easier now, but the danger greater, and they moved with increased caution. It was almost completely dark. Trees loomed in front of them without warning, and behind every tree they half-expected to find an enemy. Frequently they paused to listen, but though Paul fancied that in every patch of gloom a man was crouching, and that every sigh of wind was the stealthy approach of a rogue, Melrose heard nothing to alarm him. The night was very still, so still that he could hear a car passing along the valley road, and he knew when a twig fell to the ground.

There was an ominous threat in this silence, and as they drew closer to the verge of the wood he wished that the enemy would give some sign of life. He had no desire to bump into a sentry, and to hear the stillness broken by his yell of warning.

If trouble was coming he had no doubt that they would meet it on the fringe of the wood. That fringe must come soon, he reckoned, and he was moving with increased wariness when he saw the twinkle of a fire.

The glimmer flickered and died, and he wondered for a moment whether he had been mistaken, but it came again, a tongue of flame which was quickly quenched. The momentary light was sufficient to show him what was happening.

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A watcher who had grown tired of his own company had built a small fire beside which he crouched. So that the blaze should not be seen from the wood he had built a protecting wall, but in spite of his care an occasional flame spurted upwards.

Melrose breathed a sigh of gratitude to the man for his carelessness, and sheered off towards the left. Hardly had he gone fifty yards when he caught another gleam, and he halted. The two fires were little over a hundred yards apart, and they were, as far as he could judge, on the very edge of the wood.

After some thought, he worked still farther to the left until they were under the lee of the spur, and when he saw yet another fire he realized that they had been lighted at regular intervals along the whole face of the wood. No doubt men patrolled between them.

He lay down to consider what was to be done. To retrace their steps was unthinkable. Paul was in no condition to attempt the wide detour above the ruins of the old castle and down to the road over the farther ridge ; to remain where they were was equally impossible. The only way was to break through this cordon, and to do it so silently that the watchers were unaware of their passing.

He chose a point midway between the two left-hand fires, and, after warning Paul of his intention, began to creep steadily forward. Once a twig cracked under his foot, and they stood motionless for a full two minutes ; once when they were near the edge of the wood he thought he heard a rustle behind him, and he wheeled round—but it was not repeated and gradually the tension relaxed.

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Still within the shelter of the wood, they lay down and waited for the sentry to pass. They had to wait so long that Melrose was beginning to wonder whether he existed—when he came from the right. Apparently he was patrolling the whole line.

The stupidity of this method made him smile. They had only to wait till the man was at the other end of the line. . . .

"Now!" he breathed in Paul's ear.

With infinite patience he began to slide over the pine needles on his stomach. Paul followed like a shadow ; the only sign he gave of his presence was the occasional tap of his fingers on John's ankle.

The trees thinned as they came to the edge of the wood, and it seemed alarmingly bright out there in the open after the sombre darkness in the forest. Fortunately clouds were obscuring the moon—though how long they would continue to do so was doubtful when one considered the several gaps through which stars were shining.

Melrose felt grass under his hands. At first it was coarse and mixed with pine needles, but as he squirmed farther from the wood it grew soft and sweet ; the blades which brushed his face were cool with dew.

He knew that they must be level with the camp fires, when all at once he heard again the rustle which had worried him in the forest. This time he was sure ! It came from directly behind. . . .

He had time to swing round and rise to one knee before they were on him. Two men, he could see their shadows bulking against the clouds, ran forward as he turned. They were side by side, and with a spring

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which took him clear over Paul he dived and gathered them in his arms. As he fell he drew his arms together and landed on top of them. His shoulder slammed in the pit of one man's stomach and winded him, but the other let out a yell for help before Melrose silenced him with a blow on the temple.

There was a moment's lull while that scream penetrated to the thick heads of the other watchers, and Melrose, seizing Paul's hand, started to run down the valley.

He knew the game was up ; that yell would bring pursuers from all sides, but there was just a chance he could cover Paul's escape.

"Do you think you can reach Perignac alone if you have to ?" he asked.

"How far is it ?"

"A dozen miles up the main valley. Stop the first car you see. . . ."

"But what about you !"

"I'll come later," Melrose promised hurriedly. Running feet were coming up behind, and he would have to turn very soon. "Here's money—English—" he added, "but it will see you through. Ask for Price at the Briançon Hotel. He'll look after you. Got that ?"

"Yes, but . . ."

The running feet were very close.

"Keep in the shadow," Melrose insisted. "And don't worry—I shall find you whatever happens. Now—run !"

The last two words were a ringing command, and Paul shot away while Melrose swung round to meet his

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pursuer. He was only just in time. The man had no time to swerve and he ran full on to Melrose's fist. He fell forward with a grunt, but in falling his arms swung out, and he brought Melrose to the ground with him. Melrose was up in time to see two more men bearing down on him. They swung one to either side of him. He managed to trip one who fell heavily, but the other escaped and darted after Paul.

As Melrose raced at his heels the moon burst through the clouds. Thirty yards ahead, Paul was running for his life. Behind him was the fleet-footed man who had dodged Melrose, and other men were racing across from the right to cut him off. They were all in the middle of an open field which shone silver in the moonlight, and there was no cover to be seen.

The end came swiftly. Melrose, with the speed of despair, overtook the man who had passed him and dealt him a swinging blow behind the ear. He heard him fall, but did not stop. Instead, he swung to the right and charged a man who was cutting off Paul's retreat. His fist found a mark and the man went down with him on top. Half-winded by the fall he struggled to his knees. He heard some one come up behind, but before he could turn to defend himself a stick crashed down on his head. Sheer will power brought him to his feet. The blood was singing in his ears, the world rocking ; for one fraction of a second the haze cleared from his eyes and he saw a man pounce on Paul, heard the boy squeal like a snared rabbit, then the stick fell again and everything went black.

He pitched forward into a great silence.

CHAPTER 10 : DINNER WITH MADAME

MELROSE stirred and raised a hand to his head without opening his eyes. His skull felt as if it had been split open ; his arm, too, was a leaden weight, and he let it fall.

Then a soft arm was slipped under his shoulders, and he dreamed that a girl's voice encouraged him ; he felt the cool rim of a glass between his lips and he gulped down some liquid which burned his throat ; it made him choke convulsively, then the arm was withdrawn, and he slid back into unconsciousness.

When next he woke it was daylight. His head still ached and he felt weak, but he could open his eyes. The light dazzled him, and at first he could only stare upwards because the slightest movement of his head was an exquisite agony.

After a while he gathered that the white thing above him was a ceiling, and when it stopped swaying he found that he could turn his head after all if he took no notice of the knife that was twisted in his skull.

The window, he saw, was barred. There must be a reason for that. Then, as his brain cleared, he began to remember. Of course, this was Paul's room. The lad must be somewhere about.

"Paul!"

He meant to shout, but the sound that came from

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his lips was more of a croak. He was annoyed with his weakness and tried again. This time his voice was stronger, and though Paul did not answer it did bring some one to his side.

"Ah, Monsieur Melrose, you are awake? I am so glad. In a little while you will be quite better—yes?"

Pierre Chenevoix's sallow face bent over him, the black eyes bright with malice, and he turned away in disgust.

"But no, my friend," the Frenchman protested, "it is not I who am to blame for your hurt. Here is something that will arrange you."

Melrose took the glass from his hand and drained it.

"So!" the Frenchman laughed. "Soon you will be the new man!"

"Where's Paul!" Melrose asked. His strength and his memory of what had happened were returning rapidly.

"The little Paul? Where should he be, if not with his loving mother? You were unkind, my impetuous friend, to steal him away. . . ."

"Is he hurt?" Melrose asked, and there was a dangerous look in his eye.

"Not he—but his charming mother, oh, she is *désolée*, monsieur. I am much afraid she will talk to you seriously."

"Better her than you," Melrose answered contemptuously. "How long have I been here?"

"Since last night. . . ."

"What time is it now?"

"Seven o'clock in the evening. In an hour we dine, and I was commanded by madame, my aunt, to see

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whether you were well enough to join us. Shall I tell her you are still too sick ? " he added insolently.

Melrose looked at the two men who stood behind the mincing Frenchman.

" Run away with your poodles," he answered, " and tell madame that I accept her invitation."

The Frenchman laughed as at a huge joke.

" These—poodles, as you call them, will help you to dress. They will also see that you are not so stupid as to run away. Another bang on the head might make it soft—for good, hein ! "

Melrose closed his eyes. The man nauseated him, but he did not feel strong enough at the moment to punch that loose-lipped mouth of his. If fate was kind the chance would come later.

When he opened his eyes Pierre was gone, but he saw no reason why he should get up just yet. Dinner was not for another hour, and though he was hungry they would not put the meal forward just to please him.

He turned his head towards the two men who had retreated to the door, and it amused him to see that they kept close together and eyed him apprehensively. Their faces were not familiar, but one of them may have given him those cracks on the head.

" Were you down in the woods last night ? " he asked.

They hesitated, and then one of them admitted that they had been—a long way off, of course, and . . . "

" Did either of you try to crack my skull ? " Melrose asked softly.

Both of them denied the imputation eagerly.

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"No, no ! It was François. Two beautiful blows !" one of them added with imprudent enthusiasm. His horror when he realized what he had said was so comic that Melrose laughed out loud.

"Then François is a dead man if I can lay hands on him," he promised.

"Oh, but, monsieur," the gossiping one assured him, "François was first almost killed by the other Englishman. All his teeth broken—his nose crooked ! François's anger was terrible ! "

This was great news, but Melrose concealed his excitement to ask carelessly :

"What happened to the Englishman ? "

"We were all so busy looking for monsieur and the boy that he was forgotten. He was left lying on the ground by Monsieur Pierre, who hit him on the back of the head with his revolver. . . ."

"Ah ! Friend Pierre is a brave man !" Melrose murmured in English. "But continue your tale," he added in French.

"When we returned later to the aeroplanes he was gone !" the man said dramatically. "There was no trace. He had vanished completely ! "

"Splendid !" Melrose answered cheerfully. "Your news makes me feel what our scented Pierre would call 'the new man.' Show me my clothes and a razor, and I will get up at once."

His gaoler pointed to where his suit was hanging. It had been brushed and pressed, and though he felt that the occasion demanded something more than a rather battered lounge suit he set about his toilet with a light heart.

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Anderson's escape was the tonic that refreshed him mentally. Two strong men, armed, lay outside the enemy camp ; they would plan a rescue, and he laughed aloud at the thought of Price's face when he heard the news. That old warrior would say little, but he would look to his guns. Oh ! the fun and games were far from over. They were only just beginning !

He sluiced cold water over his head and shoulders until his flesh tingled ; it whipped the colour to his cheeks, and when he turned to demand a towel his eyes sparkled like blue diamonds.

" I could eat you with one hand ! " he threatened genially, and when his gaolers saw the muscles ripple under his dripping skin and the threat of his bunched fists they retreated hurriedly and reached for their guns.

" So ! I might have guessed ! " Melrose laughed. " Madame is taking no chances. But suppose," he added on a different note as he towelled himself vigorously, " I offered you money ? A hundred English pounds—or ten thousand French francs for good measure, what then ? "

He watched them closely without appearing to look their way. They eyed one another, and a gleam of cupidity was in the look, but they ended by shaking their heads dumbly.

" Twenty thousand, then ? " Melrose doubled his bid.

" No ! " one of the men growled sullenly. " Tempt us no more or we shall tell madame ! "

" Tell her, by all means," Melrose answered, " and

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she will praise you for your honesty. In the meantime, here is something better than praise."

He pulled a few English notes from his pocket and gave them each two.

"These are no bribe, but a token of thanks," he assured them, "and you may safely keep them. I ask nothing in return."

The men were plainly disconcerted, and while they were puzzling over the ethics of the business Melrose finished dressing.

He was busy strapping on his wrist-watch when there was a knock on the door. If it surprised him, it certainly galvanized his gaolers to action. They stuffed the money into their pockets and turned to the door with the guilty haste of urchins caught robbing an orchard.

The knocking was repeated, and as Melrose looked up from his wrist-watch Marcia Thurston came into the room.

She stood with her back to the door ; her face was pale, and her fingers plucked nervously at her dress ; there were dark rings under her eyes which told of a sleepless night, and though she held herself proudly her lips trembled.

Melrose's blue eyes raked her from head to toe ; they were cold and merciless, and beneath their scrutiny her own wavered and fell.

"What devil's work are you planning now ?" he asked contemptuously, and turned his back on her.

He walked over to the window and stared through the bars. In spite of his knowledge of her vileness he felt a disturbing pity. Her face was a tragic mask,

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and she stood revealed as a woman desperately ashamed and humble. Pride remained and courage. But they were the pride and courage of despair. She gathered them round her as a beggar wraps herself in a torn cloak, well knowing that the rents revealed her nakedness.

"I deserve that," she said quietly. "I am to blame for all that has happened. My poor excuse must be that I did not know. . . ."

Melrose did not answer, and after a pause, in which he sensed her longing for a kind word, she continued :

"These men do not understand English ; but whatever I say you must pretend that . . . we are enemies."

"That should not be difficult."

"No. I couldn't expect anything else. I am not asking for mercy. What I have done is unforgivable. But I had to tell you two things. One is that I am sorry. I would go on my knees if that would help to convince you. . . ."

"And the other reason you came ? "

Melrose's voice flicked her like a whip. She could not see his face, and did not know that his eyes were no longer cold. If he gave a word or a sign of sympathy he knew that she would break down, and then not all the gaolers in France could stop him from betraying himself. She must be made to play the game she herself had chosen. They must be enemies in the eyes of their enemies.

"Your second reason ? " he prompted her.

"To help you," she answered simply.

"Mademoiselle makes fun of me ! " he said in French, and then added in English, "Why should I

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trust you? The boy would be in England now if you had not come to warn his mother. . . .”

“I did not warn her.”

“They used your aeroplane!”

“But I was not flying it. François told them your plans after the secretary warned them of your escape. You must believe me!”

The last words were spoken imperiously; the girl was getting herself in hand, but he did not miss the involuntary tremor of her voice.

He decided to subject her to one more trial before he admitted her to his counsels.

“I have friends—whom I can trust,” he said.

He heard her breath catch, and he knew that her cheeks flamed under the insult. Surely she would go now. No woman’s vanity was proof against such a taunt; her new-found humility would turn to scorn and she would rend him. . . .

But Marcia did not go. Instead:

“That, too, I deserved. I do not hope for your friendship—but I would be honoured by your trust,” she said.

No disbelief could stand before such sincerity. Melrose felt absurdly proud of the girl who could make such rich amends. He longed to turn round and assure her that he would trust his life in her dainty hands; he longed to assure her that the past was a forgotten folly, and that when this nightmare was over he would trust her with more than his life . . . but he dared not. They had a part to play, and though he was dazzled with visions, he kept his voice cold and his shoulders rigid.

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"Where is P——, the boy?" he asked.

"Then . . . you do . . . you will?" she stammered. Her gratitude and relief were almost more than he could bear.

"Mademoiselle should control herself!" he said harshly in French. "What you ask is impossible even to please madame, your mother." Then he added in English, "I asked you a question?"

"He is locked in a cellar. . . ."

"Good God!" Even Melrose's control was not proof against such infamy, and the two gaolers eyed him with suspicion.

"You are to join him to-night," Marcia added hurriedly.

"Well! well!" Melrose answered. He realized that his outburst had been a mistake, and he was calm again. "So long as they give us beds and let us out in the daytime . . . what's the idea?"

"Yesterday's escapade has scared the servants. It appears that several bodies were left lying about. . . ." Marcia's voice was near to laughter and Melrose interrupted her curtly.

"So I am to be caged like a wild beast! Then why have they allowed you to come here?"

"They didn't; but if they find out they will think I came to crow over you. . . ."

"Was that why you came—the first time? No—don't answer," he warned her quickly as he sensed her emotion. "Let me hear you say again that you will help. . . ."

"I will do anything—anything!" she answered swiftly.

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Melrose appeared to consider and then at last he turned to face her. She was transfigured. He saw that she had come forward into the room, and now stood in front of the two gaolers who were thus fortunately not able to see her face. Her eyes were radiant, her lips were parted eagerly, and her hands strained towards him ; every line of her young body was a plea for his trust ; she could not have told him more plainly in words that no trial, no burden he could place on her shoulders, would be too heavy. . . .

He lowered his eyes lest the men behind her should read their message.

" So madame expects me to tell you where my friend has gone ? " he asked in French, with such fine scorn that her eyes clouded. " When madame has won my respect I may grant her request—till then, no ! Does she expect her prisoner to treat her like a father confessor ? I tell you she insults my intelligence, and you earn my contempt for coming on such an errand. She shall know nothing—nothing ! "

He clenched his fists and strode forward so threateningly that the two gaolers drew their guns, while Marcia, not understanding his motive, recoiled and the light died out of her eyes.

Melrose looked scornfully at the guns.

" Put away those toys ! " he ordered. " I have changed my mind. Madame shall have her message, but it won't be the one she expects ! "

While he spoke he searched his pockets for a pencil, and then, tearing a leaf from his diary, he began to write—consigning madame and all her works to perdition.

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"Anderson is at Hôtel Briançon, Perignac. He is to bring Price and car to place arranged and keep in touch with you. John."

"There!" he said, doubling it over and presenting it to Marcia. "Give her that before dinner, and she will know that I only eat at her table—because I must eat."

Marcia took the note. Her fingers trembled a little with eagerness, for she guessed the message it contained, but her voice was as scornful as his.

"Madame will no doubt excuse you, if you prefer to eat here—in the company of servants!" she said.

"Unfortunately I am madame's prisoner—so the choice is not mine."

"So it is no use asking monsieur to escort me . . . ?"

"None whatever!" he retorted, although he would have surrendered his hope of heaven for the chance.

"As monsieur pleases," she replied demurely, and he saw that she was enjoying the game. He even noticed that her fluent French had an American accent which her English did not betray.

"Perhaps this will help to restore monsieur's temper," she added. "I found it in a cellar somewhere in England."

Her hand went to the bosom of her dress, and she drew out his cigarette case.

"I trust that monsieur has matches," she said, and with a swish of her skirts she was gone.

Melrose stared rather stupidly at the cigarette case until a snigger from one of his gaolers brought him back to life.

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"What the hell are you laughing about?" he asked savagely.

"The English miss has a tongue which cuts," the man answered.

Melrose shrugged his shoulders and turned his back. The case had been replenished, and as he took out a cigarette he saw that a folded paper was tucked behind the others.

He drew it out and unfolded it, taking care to keep it hidden from his gaolers. This is what he read :

"DEAR—JOHN,—Do you remember saying that if you had your way you would have me thrashed? If a thrashing will undo the harm I have done, you may have your way with me. I myself will hand you the whip.

"To say I am sorry means so little. I am humbled and ashamed. If only you would accept my help. . . .

"Will you trust me just once? I ask nothing more, and if you refuse—I shall understand. Oh, please!

"MARCIA."

Melrose folded the note with unsteady fingers, and the cigarette, his first for more than forty-eight hours, did not taste at all.

The brazen clang of a gong floated up the wide staircase and penetrated the room where Melrose was standing. He did not hear it, but his gaolers did, and they tapped him on the shoulder.

"Dinner is served, monsieur," they said together, and he came out of his dreams with a start.

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"What? Oh—dinner!" he exclaimed, and suddenly the weight of inaction lifted from him. An ordeal was coming. Madame had surely not invited him to hear his views on the harvest. The scented Pierre would be there—and Strauss! A gathering of vultures—but he no longer cared. He would be more than a match for them all now that Marcia had renounced her folly.

It was her part with the vultures that had made him lose faith. Now, with her token next to his heart, he knew that it had been no more than a morning madness, the wayward impulse of an impetuous child. Proud as a fallen angel she might be, but such pride was good; lovely as a morning sky and cool as the dew on meadow grass before it is touched by the sun—these also were her qualities by right. For these he loved her. But for the high courage which could admit a fault, and which asked forgiveness with such divine humility, he knew that he worshipped her. He vowed that no vultures should glut themselves because of her folly; nor should she suffer the hell of remorse which must be hers if their schemes were successful.

So, with faith restored and a renewed zest for battle, he walked down into the hall to face madame.

She was sitting in the chair next to the oak chest, and his eyes flickered with amused recollection as he approached. Pierre in immaculate evening dress and Strauss, more of a blonde beast than ever in a dinner jacket, were lolling in chairs close by. Madame dismissed his gaolers with a nod, and invited him to drink.

"Not before I have eaten, thank you," he said, and

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then added casually with a wave towards the chest, "I see you have fitted a new bolt to my cage. I hope you made sure it was empty first?"

"It is empty, Mr. Melrose."

"What a pity you did not make sure of that yesterday?"

"A pity?" she replied in her calm voice, and her eyes were fixed steadily on him. "It amused you to play a childish game of hide-and-seek, and it did me no harm. I have found another cage which I hope you will find equally comfortable."

"But not half so convenient!" Melrose laughed. "Your hospitality is charming."

At that moment Marcia appeared and walked slowly towards them across the hall. Melrose let the laughter die in his throat. He stared at her as if she were an approaching plague, and then deliberately turned his back.

Madame was watching him closely.

"You do not like my English daughter?" she asked.

"One does not like birds of prey, madame," he answered, and his frozen eyes held hers contemptuously.

Her face was expressionless. She had risen from her chair and confronted him not because she must, but because he happened to be there; her pose was perfect, her self-control miraculous in all but one detail—her eyes. The lids did not flicker, the eyes themselves did not move, but the pupils contracted as if they had been shown a sudden dazzling light. They withdrew as a snake's head withdraws before striking; they were two glittering pin-points of evil.

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"As my guest—of an hour—you are privileged, Mr. Melrose," was all she said as she turned to lead the way into the dining-room.

The heavy velvet curtains were drawn to shut out the last hour of daylight. The walls and corners of the room were in shadow; on the table twelve candles burned steadily in the branched silver candlesticks. Their spears of flame were mirrored in the black polished oak, were broken into stars by the crystal glasses, and turned the knives into blades of fire.

Marcia was opposite to John with Pierre beside her; the candles suited her proud loveliness, and lent warmth to her pale cheeks; she listened to Pierre's gallantries with a curling red lip, answering briefly or not at all. More than once her eyes sought Melrose as if she had a message to convey, and although he ignored her, madame intercepted the glance. As was her way, she made immediate comment.

"My English daughter wants you to forgive her, Mr. Melrose," she said.

"Forgive her?" Melrose countered. "For obeying her mother's orders?"

"And her own instinct, my friend. She sold her brother for thirty pieces of silver."

"Which all you charming people are to share?"

Melrose included Pierre and Strauss in an eloquent gesture.

"Perhaps. But I was forgetting to introduce you. Pierre, my nephew, made your acquaintance at Hammer Lodge. . . ."

"Outside—where one might expect to meet a thief. . . ."

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Pierre's face darkened in anger, but madame was unconcerned.

"I don't think you have met Mr. Strawson," she added.

Melrose looked mildly astonished and eyed his neighbour coolly before he answered. The man sprawled rather than sat at the table. He was plainly bored with all the ceremony that madame was according her "guest." The barrel of a gun in the ribs or a lead pipe on the back of the neck would be his idea of a welcome, and he did not even turn his bullet head as madame spoke.

"Mr. Strawson?" Melrose answered. "I know him as an American gunman called Strauss!"

With a bellow of rage the man hurled his chair aside and sprang to his feet. His hand flew to his hip and Melrose was staring at the mouth of a gun.

"You lousy——" he cried. "I'll shoot your tongue out of your mouth!"

"Go ahead!" Melrose answered. "If you think murdering me will help you. If, on the other hand, you value your neck, you had better sit down."

He turned back to the dish in front of him and began to eat. There was a curious feeling in the nape of his neck where he imagined that the gun was now pointing, and the uncertainty of the next five seconds did not improve the taste of his food. He was aware that Marcia had raised a hand to her throat, and that her eyes were dark pools of horror in a bloodless face—and then the tension relaxed.

"Sit down, Herman." It was madame speaking.

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"Mr. Melrose is quite right. A murder is so stupid—and unnecessary."

"Then tell him to keep his mouth shut!" Strauss growled.

A footman, who was apparently quite unmoved by the outburst of violence, had replaced the fallen chair and he sat down.

"As for you, Mr. Melrose," the woman said, "I thought you were brave. I now know that you are clever. . . ."

"That, from madame, is superlative praise!"

"But it does not do to be too clever when you are dealing with a man who is quick to anger. He is apt to act before he reasons."

"But you, madame, are not so foolish?"

"Precisely, and that is why I invited you to dine with me. Will you mind if I ask a few questions?"

Melrose smiled engagingly.

"Not in the least, if you will allow me to answer between mouthfuls. You see, I am still rather hungry."

Madame signalled a footman to attend to his needs.

"Now, Mr. Melrose," she said, "if I were to offer you money to go away and forget—for how much would you ask?"

"How much do you think?" he countered lazily.

"I think you already have as much as you want."

"Very delicately put," he agreed. "Is the next question as easy?"

"Suppose you had rescued Paul, do you think that would have been the end?"

Melrose laughed.

"Not a bit of it. I should have come back to play at

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guns with friend Strauss—I beg your pardon, Strawson!—I should have beaten up your scented nephew, and I should have had words for you. Is that a sufficient answer?"

"Only—words, for me? And you have forgotten my daughter?"

"Never! There are some people one does not forget. . . ."

"Or forgive?"

But Melrose was drinking and did not answer. She took his silence as consent.

"One more question, Mr. Melrose, and the catechism is complete. Will you agree to stay here as my guest for a week? You must have realized that Paul is only a hostage. When I have been paid the money that is due to me, you will be at liberty to take him home to his father. After all, the quarrel is not yours. You had no right to interfere. However, I am willing to overlook your—shall we say, misplaced zeal? and to treat you and Paul as my guests while you are here, and to speed you when you go."

Melrose, who had been quietly finishing his dinner during this speech, now looked up at his companions.

Strauss was staring at madame as if she were mad. His pale blue eyes were starting from his head; his bull neck and fleshy face were scarlet with suppressed emotion; his mouth gaped—obviously a man of small intelligence.

Marcia's eyes were downcast, and a flush of shame mantled her cheeks. She had recognized the words as being almost the ones she herself had used.

Pierre was smiling cynically, thereby revealing his

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knowledge of madame. He did not believe a word of her promises.

Lastly, Melrose looked at madame. She had seen him glance from one to the other, but she showed no other sign of interest in his decision. Perhaps she already knew what it was.

"Madame," he said coolly when he had finished his scrutiny, "you are an accomplished liar—but you forget that I was present when Paul arrived."

Strauss swore, but madame ordered him back to his chair.

"There is a time for everything, Herman," she told him, "and the time is not yet come for you to interfere. Mr. Melrose and I understand each other perfectly, and I admire a brave man."

"Can you also be foolish enough to be thinking of murdering me?" Melrose asked pleasantly. "Because, if you are, I advise you to think of something else. My father would be cross if he lost his only son."

"I shall grieve with him, Mr. Melrose, if your obstinacy makes an . . . accident necessary."

"An accident?"

The faintest of smiles touched her mouth.

"Let us talk of something less distressing," she said. "I have a letter which should interest you."

She took a letter from her dress and held it up for them all to see.

"It is from my husband. He hopes that Paul is happy—and he admits that he ought to have sent him to me a long time ago."

"He says that!" Melrose was frankly incredulous.

"Why not?" she answered. "I am Paul's mother.

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My husband is glad for him to visit me—and he will be angry when I tell him that you broke into my house to kidnap him."

"I did so at his request."

"Unfortunately for you, that is not the truth, Mr. Melrose. My husband told me that he had received anonymous letters. He was afraid, and so I had Paul removed to where we both knew that the boy would be safe. It is a pity you did not stop to think before you decided to play the hero."

"I suppose Mr. Thurston has warned you against me?"

"Precisely. And if I were to hand you over to the police you would be punished as a kidnapper deserves. . . ."

"Then why don't you?"

Madame shrugged her shoulders delicately.

"I prefer to manage my own affairs," she answered. "And it is my turn to remind you that you know too much."

Melrose saw that further protest was useless. Fear for his son's safety had made Thurston play into her hands, and she would use the cards he had given her with unscrupulous skill. She had gambled on Thurston's moral cowardice and she had won. All the tricks were hers once Melrose was out of the way—and to remove him was going to be ridiculously easy.

Now that it was too late, he realized that they should have fought this diabolical woman from a distance. They ought to have called her bluff and have set the police of Europe to recover Paul. Now Thurston had

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condoned her offence, he had justified her in the eyes of the law, and she would see that he died before he could revoke the infamous lies in his letter. She would become the mistress of his millions ; his pitiful widow whom he had honoured with his dying breath.

And Paul would become her chattel to pine away in a forgotten corner while she lavished his wealth on this château—her vulture's eyrie !

Melrose felt her eyes watching him. She read his thoughts and he sketched a weary gesture of defeat.

"Have you any more cards up your sleeve, madame ?" he asked. "Not that any more are necessary because I am ready to throw in my hand ; but . . ."

"But what, Mr. Melrose ?"

He raised his eyes ; their blue was dull and lifeless ; they were infinitely weary, and his whole bearing—stooped shoulders, fumbling hands, and hollow cheeks—indicated the depth of his despair. He seemed to have no more fight in him.

"Well," he said with a ghastly smile, "you are so thorough that I have no doubt you have taken some tricks twice over. . . ."

Madame tapped the letter with a ringed finger.

"You have reasoned well," she admitted. "This letter is a treasure house. When I wrote to my husband to say that Paul was safe . . ."

"He couldn't have answered yet !" Melrose exclaimed.

"Not if my letter had been sent from here," she agreed. "Pierre posted it—in Norwich, I believe."

"Yarmouth," Pierre corrected her. "When I see

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the bold Mr. Melrose ready to interfere I think it is better to wait until after the boy is taken. . . .”

“So you see,” madame continued, “had you waited, Mr. Melrose, you would have been spared a great deal of trouble. My husband sent his reply by air mail so that I should not be kept too long in suspense. He was so thankful to hear of Paul’s safety that he begged Marcia and me to forgive him for the wrongs he had done us in the past. He had intended to leave the whole of his fortune to Paul. This he admitted was wrong, and he will make amends. The fortune is to be divided into three parts. To Marcia and myself he gives a third each—as soon as it can be arranged. The remaining third goes to Paul—when my husband dies ! ”

Silence greeted this calm statement. It was plain that neither Pierre nor Strauss had been told of this fulfilment of their plans. They stared at madame with hanging mouths, and when at last understanding came to them they shouted with triumph.

Pierre in his abandon bent down to kiss Marcia’s hand where it lay on the table. He knew that Marcia’s share was to be his, and she with it, so that he only laughed more joyfully when she withdrew her hand and he kissed the table. He seized a glass and filled it to the brim ; then he turned to her with an insolent smile and toasted her in terms which brought the blood flaming to her cheeks.

Instantly Melrose was aware of the danger in which her anger would place them.

Marcia did not know that she was promised to Pierre. If she offended him by betraying her loathing,

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madame would have to force her to consent. She would be kept a close prisoner, and all hope of her acting as connecting file with Anderson and Price would be gone. Somehow she must be made to see that she must submit to their intrigues, even to the most vile.

She was rising, as Melrose knew she would, to repay Pierre with a blow across the mouth—such words as he had used could not go unpunished—when Melrose sprang to his feet and faced her across the table.

His anger was terrible. He lashed her with his scorn until Pierre's cheap insult withered to less than nothing ; his blue eyes, hard and merciless, bored into her, and held her paralysed.

" You," he told her, " are the one who has made this vile thing possible. You sold your brother for gold and yourself to a libertine. I was fool enough to think that you were their dupe. I thought that when you saw the whole infamous game you would cry to them for mercy—but I see now that you have no pity. There is one thing you may not know : They are going to kill your father—ah, that makes you wince !—but you'll get used to the idea. You hate him, don't you ? He loved his son so you took him away. You wanted his money so that you could marry his cousin—and you took it. So why be ashamed to take his life ? You lose a father whom you hate and gain a mother—with a lover thrown in as a make-weight. A devil's exchange, you——!"

The final epithet rang through the room with deadly contempt, and a terrible silence followed. Melrose swayed on his feet and then collapsed into his chair,

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overwhelmed by bitterness. He bowed his head into his hands—and waited.

Pierre and Strauss were speechless with astonishment. They watched the colour ebb and flow in the girl's cheeks ; they knew that she was innocent of the charges Melrose brought against her, and that she was hearing the full story of their infamy for the first time. They waited in grim silence when he had finished for her to turn and rend them.

Madame was not so guileless. She suspected Melrose of some trick, and while her companions were gaping at the girl she kept her eyes on him from beginning to end of his speech—or almost to the end. For one brief instant when he flung his final curse at the girl she looked away. His very violence, the concentrated power of his venom, compelled her to glance at Marcia.

And in that fraction of a second he conveyed his warning. His eyelid flickered so lightly that even Marcia, who was staring at him with haunted eyes, wondered whether she was deceived and whether the flicker was some trick of the candle flames dancing in the still air.

Now he could do no more. Upon that slender warning and her quick wits hung the lives of three people and her own happiness.

CHAPTER II : NO SPOON IS LONG ENOUGH

MARCIA felt the tension grow taut around her. It was a silver thread which she must snap. Melrose had put her to the test. That warning flicker of his eyelid was her cue. But she was too shaken by his revelation of madame's infamy to respond at once. She stood there pale as a living statue and stared at his bowed head, while four people waited on her words.

Then her brain grew clear. She remembered Pierre's insulting toast. She had been on the verge of striking him when Melrose had forestalled her. . . .

She lifted her glass from the table and wet her lips before turning to face her mother.

For another long moment she considered her as if she would read the answer to a puzzling question in that inscrutable face, and then she frowned.

"What was he talking about?" she asked. "Why should you kill my father?"

"No one wants to kill him," Madame answered.
"Why should they?"

Melrose started up to protest, and then, as if he realized the futility of words, he sank back into his chair.

"Why indeed!" Marcia echoed with relief, and shot him a scornful glance. "We have got what we wanted. . . ."

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She turned to Pierre.

"So I am to marry you—or is that another lie?"

Pierre came to his senses and bowed with an ironic flourish.

"Mademoiselle could make a lie the truth—if she wished," he said.

"Exactly!—If I wish," she answered coldly. "I shall not marry any man who insults me. . . ."

"Forgive me, Marcia," he begged hurriedly. "I was so excited by what madame, your mother, told us. Always I have loved you; I was so happy. . . ."

Marcia allowed a faintly mocking smile to turn the corners of her mouth.

"At the prospect of winning me—or my money?" she asked.

"Of both, *naturellement*, since the one goes with the other. But if I had to choose . . ."

She laughed and caught hold of his arm.

"Don't perjure yourself, Pierre," she cried gaily. "I shall not be parted from my money."

Pierre took this as encouragement and put an arm round her waist, but she shook herself free.

"We are not married yet—nor even promised," she said curtly, and turned to her mother.

"There are still things I do not understand," she said with a puzzled frown. "When we have our money—you will send Paul back to his father?"

"Why, of course, *chérie*," madame answered smoothly.

Marcia sighed with relief.

"Then the sooner everything is settled the better. Mr. Melrose can take him . . ."

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" You are interested in Mr. Melrose ? "

" Only in his departure ! If I were a man I would kill him for the things he said ! "

Madame smiled and rose from the table. She went round the table to where Melrose still sat with his head bowed in his hands.

" The poor man will be well looked after," she said.
" Shall we go into the hall where the chairs are more comfortable ? "

The others moved towards the door, but Melrose did not seem to hear and she touched his shoulder.

" I have always understood that the English are good losers, Mr. Melrose," she taunted him.

Melrose straightened his back and tried to smile.

" It is also said that we don't know when we are beaten," he answered ruefully. " What do you think ? "

" If you like I will tell you what *you* are thinking," she countered.

" Sort of mind-reading ? "

But madame did not smile as she walked beside him to the door.

" You are hoping that your friend Anderson will help you," she said.

Melrose laughed.

" Thank you for telling me that he has escaped. I shall certainly hope now," he answered.

" He will have to be very clever to find you," she retorted. " But let us talk of something more pleasant. It may help you to forget that I am planning an accident for you . . . and before we start I will propose a little game, Mr. Melrose, if you agree ? "

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Melrose bowed slightly as he escorted her to her chair. He wondered what devilry was coming now.

A footman served them with coffee, a second offered them brandy or a choice of liqueurs, and a third submitted boxes of cigars and cigarettes.

A heavily shaded lamp stood by madame's chair. She was in a pool of light, a graceful hostess dispensing hospitality to her guests who sat at their ease around her. The few wall lamps made the hall a place of shadows ; faces were indistinct, voices came from a distance and died away listlessly as the speaker lifted a twinkling glass or flicked the ash from a cigarette.

Melrose warmed his glass in his cupped hands and waited for madame to begin. She was in the centre of the stage, the focus from which all the others radiated, and although he was conscious that Pierre was murmuring to Marcia and that Strauss was drinking his second brandy, he thought of them only as an audience in the darkened hall. Madame alone in her pool of light would decide whether they should come on the stage and play their parts.

While he was waiting he amused himself by thinking how easy it would be to escape now. The light switches were within a yard of his hand. If he stood up he could flick them off and then run to the door. Strauss would reach for his gun. Madame would almost certainly have the sense to switch on the lights again. What would be the odds on a bullet in the back ? Or would he . . .

" Mr. Melrose," madame's musical voice interrupted his calculations, " I wonder whether you realize what a trouble you are to me ? "

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So it was coming ! He settled himself more comfortably in his chair and waited for her to continue. She would not expect an answer to her question.

" You have interfered unpardonably in my affairs. I believe I should be justified in getting rid of you at once. . . ."

" Then why hesitate, madame ? I am at your mercy."

" I know, and for that reason alone I must hesitate. One does not shoot a sitting bird. It must always, I believe, be given a chance to escape ? "

" Only sportsmen trouble about such trivial points of honour," he declared.

" And in France, you would say, there are no sportsmen ? I understand, and I am not offended ; but I would give the sitting bird a chance to fly for another reason. I like to be amused. I like to see a brave creature fight for its life, and when the creature is a man . . ."

She considered him thoughtfully, and Melrose, seeing the glittering points of her eyes, knew that she was mad. She was inhuman, bestial. Greed was her god ; the power to make men suffer was her passion. Pierre, Strauss, Marcia, were puppets to be used and destroyed. He was the present victim to be sacrificed —but it had to be done cunningly ; he had to be given some semblance of a chance—the sort of chance that the Christian martyrs were given against the lions—while she had a ringside seat. If he beat one lion she would bear him no grudge ; she might even like him better, but she would fatten him up for the next.

" A man like you," she continued, " is so quick, so

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strong, so clever, that it would be foolish to let you go too easily. And yet I can think of no way . . . perhaps you can help me ? ”

“ Aren’t you afraid I should suggest something that gave me a real chance ? ” he asked.

“ You could always suggest, Mr. Melrose . . . and since you are willing to help me we will talk of other things while we are both thinking. The only stipulation I make is that if you suggest a way and I agree—you will take up the challenge.”

“ And if I refuse ? ”

Madame lowered her eyes and considered her polished nails ; she arranged the fall of her gown over her knees, caressing the smooth green velvet with her white hand ; then she looked up. Her face was calm, even her eyes were still, but it was the face of a gorgon with the power to turn her beholder to stone.

“ You will not refuse,” she said, and the way she said it brooked no answer.

Melrose stretched out his hand for some more brandy, but when his glass was full he put it down untasted. The bruise on the back of his head was already throbbing, and he might need all his strength before the night was over. He knew that madame had decided to finish him, and that the game would not go on for ever. She would play with him and maul him, and when she was tired she would dispatch him. A bullet in the back would serve her as well as any other way—she could tell the police that he had tried to escape with the boy, and they would believe her.

Some instinct made him look up from the cigarette he was lighting.

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Madame had transferred her gaze to Marcia, and as he too looked at the girl he saw the reason.

Pierre was speaking to her, but she paid him no attention. She was leaning forward, and in her eyes was a look of horror. Her control was at breaking-point, and when she too realized that madame's eyes were on her she jumped up and came to her mother's chair.

"What do you mean!" she cried. "You would not dare to kill him. You said he was going with Paul. . . ."

"It was you who said that, *chérie*," her mother answered.

"But why kill him? It is murder however you do it!"

"Why, little one, you are afraid for Mr. Melrose? And yet you hate him so?"

Marcia tried her best to recover the ground she had lost. She explained that however much she hated some one she could not have him murdered. Melrose could do them no harm once the money was theirs—his death would ruin everything. . . .

Madame listened and agreed to all she said, but her interest was of the cat for the mouse. She waited until the girl had finished and then she calmly showed her claws.

"I enjoyed the little comedy at dinner, *ma chérie*, between you and Mr. Melrose, but this little scene I have enjoyed infinitely more. Your innocence is so touching. You will make an adorable little wife for Pierre—no, little is wrong: An Amazon for him to tame. And Pierre knows so many ways of taming a woman; don't you, Pierre?"

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The Frenchman sniggered, and Melrose decided that it was time for them to sail under their true colours. He ought to have known that madame would not credit Marcia with the evil he had hurled at her. She trusted nobody, and she could read men's minds like a book.

"Bravo, Marcia," he said gently. "We both forgot that when one sups with the devil no spoon is long enough."

He got up from his chair and went to her side.

"Madame," he said, "permit me to lead your daughter to a chair, and then I am at your service."

Madame inclined her head in assent, and Melrose pressed the girl's arm.

"Come," he smiled. "We are not dead yet. And who knows what'll happen next?"

"I'm . . . sorry . . . I forgot my part," she faltered.

"And I'm glad you did. There are some parts that no one ought to play. Come and sit down."

Once more he urged her forward, but as she obeyed him she stumbled, and would have fallen at his feet if he had not steadied her, and then swept her into his arms.

Pierre jumped up to take her, but Melrose shouldered him out of the way. Her faint made him savage. It added one more line to their overflowing account, and he swore that when she and Paul were safe he would burn the château over their heads as one smokes out a wasps' nest.

Marcia lay with her head on his shoulder ; her eyes were closed, and her breath was warm on his cheek as he swung round to look for a couch. There was one

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near the staircase. He was striding towards it—when she whispered in his ear.

So it was not a faint ! His arms tightened round her thankfully, and it was as well that his back was to the others or his joy must have betrayed her ruse.

But why had she done it ? Then he remembered how she had looked at him at dinner—as if she had news to convey.

Her lips were almost touching his ear ; the murmur that came from them was not so loud as the beating of his heart, but he heard every syllable, and he could have sung for joy.

“ Bob will . . . be there . . . to-night.”

The message filled him with exhilaration. He knew that before the night was out he must contrive to join them. Bob and Price would be armed ; they would have a gun for him ; between them they would find a way to force this devil’s stronghold . . . he squeezed Marcia until a faint gasp showed him that his gratitude was painful, and then he set her down on the couch.

He longed to thank her, to laugh, to tell madame that in spite of all her cunning she had been outwitted—but Pierre and Strauss were bending over the couch and with an effort of will he kept his face sober.

He forced brandy between her lips, and when she spluttered and looked up at him his eyes twinkled. She read their message and was dazzled by their dancing blue, so that she closed her own with a sigh. Pierre and Strauss may have thought that the sigh was weariness, but he knew that it was a sigh of relief because she had not entirely failed him.

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He straightened his back and walked slowly to his chair near madame.

She had remained impassive throughout the commotion. That was what he would expect of her, and he guessed too that she had not been deceived by Marcia's faint. Her first words proved that he was right.

"Did she speak to you of love?" she asked.

"If she had—I would have stayed to listen," he answered.

"Well, whatever her message—it will not help you. In a short while you will be going to your . . . guest chamber."

"Not the charming room with the barred window?"

"It has a barred window," she answered dryly, "but you have not seen it before."

There was an edge to her voice which showed that there might be a limit even to her self-control, but to his amazement she smiled and began to talk easily of all that had happened as if it were a tale in which she had no part.

He could not help but admire her complete mastery over her nerves, and he did his best to play up to her. That she was waiting to pounce on some ill-chosen word and turn it to his hurt did not make the game easier for him; nor did the fact that he had no idea of how she was aiming to trap him help him to steer clear of danger.

For ten minutes they threw the ball backwards and forwards while the others listened. They also knew that something was going to happen; that sooner or later Melrose would hear the snap of steel and that he would be caught. But how or when was a secret that

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madame alone knew, and they listened to every word with quivering nerves.

Madame explained to Melrose how he and Paul had been caught as they left the woods. The fires were her idea ; the solitary man who had to walk the whole width of the valley was also her idea. She had foreseen exactly what Melrose would do. He would choose a point half-way between the fires, and she had placed two men at each of those points. They had orders to let Melrose get out of the wood before they showed themselves. . . . It had been so simple.

In return Melrose told her of the fright she had given him by placing her wineglass on the lid of the chest, and of the reason for the secretary's unhappy experience.

" You are certainly resourceful, Mr. Melrose," she complimented him. " Where did you learn to look after yourself so expertly ? "

" Oh, here, there, and everywhere—mostly here."

" But the foundations were laid at your school in England ? You make me wonder whether Paul would not be happier at one of your great public schools."

" I am sure he would."

" Why do you say that ? What do they teach you that we cannot ? Those terrible school games—cricket, football ! "

" There are other things besides team games."

" For instance ? "

" Well, boxing is one. . . ."

" So I should imagine from the way you attacked my servants. But boxing is so—rough, so much blood, so much clumsiness. In France we like elegance, a quick eye, we teach them to fence."

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"Why not," Melrose answered. "We also fence a little."

"You mean—you have learnt to fence?"

"Why, yes," he answered. "I'm pretty bad, but . . ."

His voice tailed away into silence. Madame was smiling.

He looked at her without comprehending. He wondered why the air had grown oppressive and why his tongue was dry in his throat. He heard Marcia draw in a quick breath and Strauss rap out an excited oath ; he saw Pierre lean towards him—and he looked again at madame.

She was still smiling . . . a smile beside which the Mona Lisa's was a ribald laugh . . . and then he knew what the others had guessed a full minute ago.

The trap was sprung. He had spoken the word which condemned him.

"So—you fence, Mr. Melrose?"

Madame's musical voice had never sounded more diabolical than it did then. She had marked down her prey and chosen the weapon with which to destroy it ; she was in no hurry to end his agony. Every moment that he twisted and sought to escape was a moment to savour with sadistic calm, and when she saw that he was still uncertain of the game in store for him she enlightened him with leisurely enjoyment.

"I knew I could trust to your ingenuity, Mr. Melrose," she said softly. "What better entertainment could we have than a display of your skill with a rapier? Old customs die out so fast, but here in France the rapier is still treasured as a gentleman's . . ."

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"Are you suggesting that I should fight a duel?" Melrose asked her bluntly.

"Let us call it—an affair of honour."

"But my fencing is child's play! I haven't touched a foil for years."

"A foil, Mr. Melrose? A thing with a button on the end? This time, I assure you, there will be no buttons and no leather jackets."

"Then it will be a butchery!"

"Of you—or of your enemy? Come, Mr. Melrose, a gentleman does not refuse a challenge. You would not deny us an exhibition of your skill?"

Melrose felt the sweat pricking his skin. He had spoken the truth when he said that his fencing was child's play. The little he knew had been learnt for fun, and to strengthen his wrist; the thought of facing a naked blade in the hands of an expert was a horror which not even his nerves could stand. He saw himself spitted, he saw the lunge to his heart which he would be powerless to prevent, and Madame's low smile of triumph as the blood welled from his mouth. . . .

There must be some way to escape this butchery.

Madame was watching him, her eyes bright as a snake's, and she saw his hunted look round the room. At a sign from her Strauss drew his gun.

"It would be a pity if a brave man like you were killed by a bullet in the back, Mr. Melrose," she said, drawing his attention to the menacing barrel.

He wheeled round at her words. Strauss had his finger on the trigger, his elbow rested on the back of a chair, and there was no mistaking the murderous look

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in his eyes. For a full minute the two men faced each other, and then with a sigh of resignation Melrose walked away. He sank down into his chair and lit a cigarette.

The sight of that gun had calmed his nerves as nothing else could have done. It was his wits against theirs now, with death as the stake, and he knew that he did not want to die. They might lead him to the very edge of the grave, but while life remained he would keep his fighting brain clear and cool ; one moment of inspiration, one twist of the wheel, and they would find him as elusive as quicksilver. . . .

He blew out the match and set it down with a steady hand in the ash-tray, then he leaned back in his chair and regarded her with lazy eyes.

"Your move, madame," he said coolly.

"Was it ever yours ?" she asked, her eyes greedy with anticipation. A slight tremor shook her shoulders, as if the prospect of the slaughter she was to witness was too exquisite to be suppressed.

"All that remains is to find an opponent worthy of your steel," she added. "Some one who will uphold the honour of my country. . . ."

She was silent and seemed to ponder the question, her eyes downcast, her toe tapping thoughtfully on the polished floor.

Melrose guessed that this play-acting was meant to unsettle his nerves. She must have made her choice as soon as the game was decided, and now that he was no longer afraid he did not see why she should hold the stage alone.

"Surely the choice shouldn't be difficult, madame?"

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he said ironically. "I have upset so many gallant Frenchmen since I arrived that they must all be thirsting for revenge. What about little Henri? Or better still François? I have an account to settle with him."

"Would you fight with a servant, monsieur?" she asked with mock reproach.

"I don't want to fight at all, but if I must . . ."

She implored him to be silent and then beckoned to her nephew with an imperative hand.

"Come here, Pierre," she said. "You shall be my champion. I hope you did not drink too much wine at dinner?"

Pierre swaggered up to her and bowed over her hand. His cheek was flushed and he had certainly drunk more than was wise, but he was arrogantly confident.

"You do me a great honour, *chère madame*," he exclaimed.

Madame eyed him maliciously.

"Then mind you are worthy of it," she retorted.

"You have the weapons?"

"Upstairs, on the wall of my . . ."

"Fetch them, and while you are away I will see that the room is prepared.

She dismissed him and turned her attention once more to Melrose.

"My nephew is an expert swordsman, monsieur, so you need not be ashamed to play with him."

"To . . . play?"

"But, of course! Just a little after-dinner amusement—a command performance. You will find him

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a little wild perhaps, but that will be the wine he has drunk ; you are in luck, because it will make his eye crooked."

" Suppose that in spite of a crooked eye he manages to run me through. Won't you find the police a little difficult ? I mean, duels *are* forbidden even in the wilds of France, aren't they ? "

Madame sighed.

" It will certainly be a pity if Pierre remembers that you called him a libertine. . . . "

" Or you a bird of prey ! "

" Exactly, or even if he remembers that you insulted Marcia. All these things might make him forget to play for one unfortunate moment. He might, then, run you through, Mr. Melrose—but it would be an accident, not a duel."

" I see."

Madame saw him glance at Marcia.

" Marcia will not help you," she said softly. " She will be Pierre's wife, and in this country, just as in yours, a wife's lips are sealed."

Melrose did not answer. The tide of fortune was running too strongly against him. Strauss's gun was cutting off all hope of retreat ; Pierre was on his way to find the swords ; madame's watchful eyes covered his every movement—it was beginning to look as if all the earths were stopped.

" No loophole, Mr. Melrose ? " madame taunted him. " And yet there is only one man and one gun to face—at the moment."

" I am very comfortable in this chair," he answered.

" All the same, I think we will take extra precau-

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tions. I pay you the compliment of not underestimating your courage."

She got up and pressed the bell that was on the wall near the fireplace, and while she was waiting for it to be answered she stood with her hand resting on the overmantel.

Benoit came in. His jaw was covered with plaster, which was a sight that pleased Melrose.

Madame gave the man her orders.

"Clear the floor," she commanded. "Get two men to help you."

The footmen came, and under her instructions they swung the chairs and couches against the walls ; they took up the rugs and set the tables behind the screen that hid the door to the kitchen. When they had done, there was a wide space of shining floor hedged round by the disordered furniture ; it glowed in the subdued light, a floor of polished wood blocks on which a hostess might invite her guests to dance. . . .

Madame considered the arena while Benoit waited for her further orders. She seemed satisfied, for at length she nodded and bade him fetch six other men. When they were lined up in front of her she ordered them into pairs, having first assured herself that they were all men of sufficient physique for the task she was allotting.

"Two behind each door," she said, "and the whip for whichever of you lets a man pass ! "

She turned to Benoit.

"I hold you responsible," she menaced him. "See that you do not fail me again or . . ."

The threat went unfinished, but from the man's

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blanched face and cowering shoulders it was plain that he knew the rest. Madame's threats were never idle, and she punished incompetence with ruthless severity.

Melrose, in spite of the peril in which he stood, found time to wonder at the hold she had over her servants. He could only suppose that she ruled them with a whip and rewarded them with food ; a treatment that served very well with dogs, and these men were little else. They were trained to obedience from birth, and madame, in their eyes, could do no wrong.

They marched off in twos to take up their posts : stolid, unemotional peasants in the powdered wigs of flunkeys—and the doors closed behind them.

Melrose had a momentary glimpse of lights down in the valley as the front door was opened. This sign of a friendly world so close and unattainable brought home with startling clearness the unreality of his present surroundings. It seemed as if he had only to shout for help to bring the comfortable bulk of a policeman into the doorway—and then the door closed.

"Now I think we are ready to enjoy ourselves," madame announced. "Herman, you and your little pistol will guard the stairs. Marcia, you and I will see that the fight is fair. You for Mr. Melrose ; me for Pierre. Perhaps you would like a word with the Englishman you hate so much ? There is time while we wait for Pierre."

The concession was made with no compassion, but merely so that she could draw the last ounce of sensation from the game she was planning. Tears and supplications would set the edge to her pleasure, and Melrose was determined that she should have neither.

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He crossed swiftly to where Marcia was standing, and, drawing his arm through hers, he guided her on to the cleared space and began to walk up and down.

"Keep your nerve," he said gently. "We are not through with them yet. Pretend I am trying to console you and listen carefully. . . ."

Each time their backs were to the others, and they were near the far end of the room, he lowered his voice. Madame had given him the opportunity and he seized it with both hands.

"When the fight starts . . . stay near Strauss. . . . If I get a chance to bolt . . . jog his arm as he shoots . . . they'll lock you up, I expect . . . show a handkerchief on the window-ledge. . . ."

Marcia played her part bravely. She paced the room at his side and stared straight in front of her with wide, sorrowful eyes. Terror lurked in them, and she often pressed her handkerchief to her mouth to hide the quiver of her lips. She was proud in her distress, too proud to break down before madame's watchful stare.

Melrose, each time he faced the stairs, glanced expectantly up and wondered why Pierre was so long in coming. He saw him before Marcia was aware of him, and he swung her round with his hands on her shoulders.

His hand went under her chin and raised it. Her eyes were damp. The blue of a night sky looked up at him ; until that moment those eyes had not known fear. He had seen them proud, he had seen them humble, but now he saw that in their depths which filled him with exultation. They were afraid, not for

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herself, but for him—and because death was even then marching towards him down the stairs he would not tell her how much he longed for her.

Instead, he smiled recklessly, forcing her to smile, compelling her to still her trembling lips.

"We who are about to die," he warned her, and she knew by the pressure of his hands that the moment she dreaded was coming.

"Or maybe not to die," he added. "And, above all, let them see you smile, sweetheart!"

The word slipped out involuntarily. He saw her flush and his hands dropped from her shoulders.

"Coals of fire," she whispered. "I have led you to the gates of hell and yet you . . ."

"The gates of paradise!" he protested.

There were stars in her eyes. He knew they were tears, but before they could fall she was close to him, her body pressed against his, her arms round his neck, and his lips drawn down to hers.

"If you die I shall die," she said simply, and then with her hand in his she turned to face the stairs.

Madame was the first to speak.

"That touching exhibition should make your task easier, my Pierre," she said.

Pierre was half-way down the last flight of stairs. He had changed his stiff shirt for a soft one of silk ; a scarlet sash was wound round his waist, and in his arms he held three glittering blades. He had obviously intended to make a startling entrance, but now with all eyes upon him he spoilt it with over-acting.

His eyes flashed murder. One hand went to his hip and he struck a swaggering pose.

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"It seems I come in the nick of the time," he sneered, and Melrose laughed. He knew that it was the last thing he ought to do if he wanted to preserve a whole skin, but he saw madame's look of chagrin, and that was too much for him.

"Take a ring-side seat," he said to Marcia, and led her as close as he dared to Strauss, who was staring in amazement at the flashing figure on the stairs. Melrose gave her hand a final reassuring pressure, and then turned his full attention to Pierre.

"You come, as you say, in the nick of the time," he laughed. "If I had known that you were going to put on the fancy dress . . ."

"Enough of this fooling," madame snapped.
"Bring me the rapiers."

Pierre hastened to obey. He hurried down the remaining stairs and across the floor to where madame stood. With a ceremonious bow he proffered the hilts of the rapiers while nursing the blades in the crook of his arm.

Madame examined each one carefully. She finally selected the one that pleased her and moved to one side; then she told Melrose to make his choice of the two that remained.

"Choose well," she advised him.

But to Melrose both blades looked alike, and he made his choice at random. He was racking his brain to remember the few rules which he had ever mastered; quickness of foot and eye, and a perfect sense of balance had been his greatest assets, and he remembered now that his instructor had once told him that he would make a fine fencer—some day. That day had not

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dawned because he had not cared enough. He was likely to pay for that carelessness with his life in the next few minutes.

As he felt the weight and balance of his rapier some of the forgotten thrill returned. He thought what fun it would have been to have mastered this perfumed Frenchman ; even now he might take him off his guard if he could persuade him to treat the affair lightly.

Madame took up her position between the two men.

" You understand," she said to Melrose, " that whatever happens—there will be no interference."

" Whatever happens, madame? Suppose I am wounded in the sword arm?"

" Then you will change the sword to the other hand, Mr. Melrose; but I think I can promise you that Pierre will not be so clumsy."

" That's a great comfort," he grinned. " And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that I should win?"

" Do you think it possible?"

Melrose shrugged his shoulders.

" Frankly, no. But I shall be desperate, and I might think up some trick. . . ."

" You mean—a foul?"

" I don't know what I mean, madame. To you it might be a foul, but surely you would not let that worry you? Pierre's skill should be equal to any emergency, and I am quite willing to allow him the same advantages."

Madame's snake eyes regarded him fixedly. She tried to read the reason for this cool request, but his

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smiling ease baffled her. She was sure that some plan lay in the brain behind those blue eyes that returned her gaze so unwaveringly. With death at his shoulder he was still scheming to elude her—and yet, the thing was not possible. If he hoped to beat Pierre by a foul he should not have warned him. Then why? . . .

To refuse his request would be to spoil her own enjoyment. He had whetted her appetite by throwing down this gage. It would add spice to the encounter, but she must be sure of one thing first.

"Will you try to kill him by a foul stroke?" she asked.

Melrose saw that he had got her guessing and he laughed.

"And if I did, madame, you could hardly blame me," he said. "But to please you and reassure him I promise not to kill him!"

Madame turned to Pierre.

"You have heard Mr. Melrose's request. What is your answer?"

The Frenchman flashed scorn from his black eyes.

"I am impatient for the combat," he cried. "I have yet to learn the foul that I do not know. . . ."

"That I can well believe," Melrose murmured.

"And if I win, madame, what is my reward?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"A good night's rest is the most I can promise you, Mr. Melrose," she answered.

Melrose raised his sword to the salute.

"Then I am ready, madame. On with the war, and may the dirtiest fighter win!"

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"You play the buffoon, monsieur," she retorted coldly. "But even a buffoon does not laugh when he is dead. Please take up your positions, gentlemen."

Pierre raised his sword with a flourish in salute, and stepped forward.

He had rolled the white silk of his sleeves above his elbows, and as he stood with heels together and rapier point lowered while he waited for the signal to engage, he was an elegant and sinister opponent. Tall and slim, with wide shoulders and narrow flanks, he looked his best with a sword in his hand. The mincing libertine was transfigured ; chin held high, white face and sneering black eyes topped by his oiled black hair, he looked supremely confident, and Melrose, facing him in a grey lounge suit, and feeling awkward by comparison, saw no reason to doubt that the confidence was well founded.

Madame left them in the centre of the room and walked over to the electric light switches.

"*En garde!* gentlemen," she said. "In a moment or two I am going to turn on all the lights. That will be the signal for you to engage."

She paused with her hand on the switch panel for a final survey of the scene. The stage had been set by her own hand, all the exits barred ; Melrose was faced by the glittering blade which would surely kill him within the next few minutes. There was no possibility of escape . . . and yet she hesitated to give the signal. Some instinct warned her that it was not wise to give him even this shadow of a chance. . . .

But even while she hesitated she knew that she would take the risk. Her senses clamoured for the

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spectacle ; nothing could satisfy her lust but the rasp and flicker of dancing blades, and the light of fear in a man's eyes as he saw the point reaching for his throat.

"Don't kill him too quickly, my Pierre," she called softly, and as her fingers slid down the panel the room sprang into a blaze of light.

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PIERRE'S blade slithered free. It danced in a ring of fire in front of Melrose ; it hung poised in motionless flight and then darted forward, a silver streak, straight for his heart. It pricked through his clothes and bit into his skin and withdrew, all in the same flashing motion.

His own sword was as useless as a peeled wand. So rapid had been Pierre's thrust that he was still dazzled by the sudden flood of light, and did not realize that the fight had begun.

"Six times I shall prick you so," Pierre boasted, "and the seventh time the point of my sword, he will go straight through your throat."

Melrose had not the slightest doubt that he could accomplish his boast. It had not needed that wasp sting and Marcia's frightened gasp to prove to him that he was helpless. He felt an unreasoning urge to fling down his sword and bolt—he did not mind where, so long as it was away from that merciless blade and the mocking eyes which read the fear in his heart.

"Two!"

Pierre pricked him in the shoulder and danced away. Both thrusts had been timed to perfection. They meant to pierce the skin and draw blood, and they did, but they were also meant to put the fear of death into the victim, and in that they failed.

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Melrose was stung to a cold fury. His nerves grew steady, and the haze of fear cleared from his eyes as he stamped down the panic which had threatened to overwhelm him.

For the first time since Pierre's lightning attack he realized that he had a weapon in his hand and two feet to lead him out of danger. As his confidence returned he found himself remembering the correct counter to each thrust, and although the strokes were clumsy they served to ward off Pierre's attack and to give him time to think.

Pierre was not attacking hard. In fact, those two early touches made him careless ; Melrose's clumsiness did not lessen his confidence, and it was some few moments before he realized that his blade was no longer meeting empty air. The whine and clash of steel grew louder, and sometimes Pierre was surprised to feel a shock that jarred his wrist or to see the flash of steel aimed at his throat.

Once he had to retreat hurriedly, and the surprise of this unexpected attack sharpened his wits, so that he laughed savagely and began to press forward, his blade flickering like forked lightning.

"Three ! Four !" he cried triumphantly in quick succession. "Your time grows close, my friend !" But Melrose had seen a chance of escape, and he retreated steadily before the tempestuous attack. Behind him was the deep window-seat spread with cushions ; if he could reach these in time . . .

"Five !"

Pierre's sword leapt for his throat and drew a bead of blood. He was smarting from five separate wounds

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now, and his wrist was growing tired. He was gambling on Pierre's vanity and on the knowledge that he would not strike to kill until the sixth warning had been given.

They were still three yards from the window-seat.

"Six!"

It was now—or never. Pierre was intent on the kill. He pressed forward tempestuously, and Melrose retreated fast—too fast. He slipped on the polished floor, and he put a hand out behind to save himself. His blade was flung out in a wide arc, leaving his throat defenceless, and Pierre, with arm and rapier in a straight line, leapt forward with a gleam of triumph and lunged . . .

Melrose's fingers tightened on the cushion; he swayed sideways and swung his arm round straight in line with the plunging blade. The whole weight of Pierre's body was behind his thrust. Once he had started he could not stop until the stroke was completed, but instead of his enemy's throat his sword was driven to the hilt in a leather cushion.

Quicker than light Melrose was on his feet; he loosed his sword and caught Pierre's wrist; with a vicious twist he sent sword and cushion flying, and then, locking one arm under Pierre's chin and twisting one of Pierre's wrists behind his back with the other, he turned to face madame with Pierre as a shield against Strauss's gun.

For a while no one spoke. The whole episode was over before the spectators realized what was happening. Marcia's face still held the look of frozen horror which had come when Melrose stumbled. Madame was

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leaning forward, a hand to her breast, her eyes glittering as she waited for the death stroke, Strauss was putting his gun back in his pocket. . . .

Madame was the first to recover. Her face was wiped clear of all expression. Melrose looked at her over Pierre's shoulder and smiled grimly.

"I hope you will keep your word, madame," he said.

The excitement of battle had shaken some of her self-control, and her voice vibrated oddly as she answered.

"You shall have a good night's rest, Mr. Melrose."

He shook his head.

"I am not thinking of rest at the moment. Your word was that the game must be played to a finish."

This wholly unexpected comment startled her.

"Do you want to fight on?" she asked incredulously. "Pierre will merely kill you!"

"Oh, no," Melrose replied calmly. "People are not killed with the weapons I shall choose. I have played him at his game and disarmed him."

"By a foul!"

"You forget, madame, that he would have killed me when I was on my knees! Can you think of a more bloody foul than that? If you refuse my request I shall pick up my sword and run him through as he deserves."

Madame was silent so long that he was compelled to repeat his question.

"What weapons do you choose?" she asked at last.

"Fists! I have a score to settle with friend Pierre. I want to hurt him."

Pierre gurgled in the stranglehold of Melrose's arm.

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"I don't know how to box . . . it will be murder!"

"Never mind, little one," Melrose soothed him. "I expect you know as much about boxing as I do about fencing."

He loosed Pierre and gave him a few seconds to recover before flicking him across the mouth with his open hand.

"Come," he taunted, "I shall count six just as you did, and on the seventh you will go nicely to sleep. One!"

The blow was an open-handed slap on the ear.

"Two!"

The blow landed on Pierre's nose and made him run wild, which was just what Melrose wanted.

"Three! Four!"

Two more raps on the nose as Pierre charged him made the Frenchman roar with pain. Tears streamed from his eyes and blood ran from his nose on to his white shirt.

"Five!"

Melrose felt a tooth crack under his knuckles and was afraid he had hit too hard. He did not want to discourage Pierre too much, but merely to blind him with rage and pain.

For a moment the Frenchman swayed on his feet and looked as if he would cry, then he wiped his nose with his hand and saw the blood on his fingers. Realization dawned on him that it was his own blood, and he looked up wildly for a chance to escape more punishment, only to see Melrose backing away from him as if he were afraid. The combination of his own blood and of Melrose's retreating figure restored his

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flagging courage, and with a scream of rage he dashed at his tormentor with whirling fists.

Melrose had retreated until his back was to the big double doors of the salon ; he was praying that the doors were not locked, but he found time to smile at Marcia, and to see her almost imperceptible nod before the whirlwind was on him.

He met Pierre's rush with feet firmly planted, and a straight left which brought the Frenchman to a sudden halt, and nearly jolted his head off his neck.

"Six!" he cried, "and—seven!"

His right crashed straight into Pierre's chest. It was six inches above the solar plexus, and though it drove the wind in a great gust from Pierre's lungs and bent his breast bone, it was not a clean knock-out. But it had the effect that Melrose desired. Pierre shot backwards as if he had been catapulted ; his legs tried to keep pace with his falling body, his arms flailed the air in a desperate attempt to retrieve his balance. The attempt was vain, and he fell heavily and slid still farther on the polished floor.

Madame and Strauss were too busy watching Pierre's fantastic progress to see Melrose's hand steal out behind his back and try the handle of the door, but his heart sank as he felt the door resist the slight pressure of his back. It was locked.

All along he had had to take this risk, but now that the risk had proved a reality he was prepared. He could have sworn that the two footmen had not locked the door after them ; he had listened most intently, and could only suppose they had taken the precaution when they heard the clash of arms.

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Anyway, it was no good crying for the moon. His only chance was to break down the lock, and from what he had seen of the door, that should not be difficult.

He took two quick steps forward as if he were preparing to deal out more punishment to Pierre, and then before the others could guess his intentions he wheeled round and charged full at the door. His shoulder, backed by thirteen stone of bone and muscle, met the panel with a resounding thud, there was a crash of splintering wood, the door burst open, and he fell headlong into the room just as a bullet smacked into the woodwork high above his head.

He picked himself up in time to see one of the footmen make a rush towards him. The man came at him with hands stretched for his throat, and Melrose, sinking down on to his knee, caught him round the legs and, heaving upwards and backwards, pitched him over his shoulders. The man's boot caught him a blow above the eye, but he heard him crack his head against the wainscoting, and he waited no longer.

He neither knew nor cared what had happened to the second watchman—although he found out later that the man must have been looking through the keyhole ; the opening door had caught him between the eyes, and he was stunned.

He raced to the nearest window and wrenched it open. There was a drop of little over three feet to the ground, and he landed on a flower-bed just as a second bullet whined over his head. Two shadows near the main door uttered startled cries and set off in pursuit. He raced along the front of the house, more eager to get out of range of Strauss's gun than to outdistance the

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two men who were bellowing behind him. Fortunately the night was dark and he made a poor target—but at that moment the salon lights blazed out, and he was caught in the full radiance from one of the windows. Instinctively he swerved towards the nearest patch of darkness, and as he did so two bullets smacked into the gravel at his feet.

An instant later he was round the corner of the house, and sprinting as hard as he could for the shelter of the pine trees.

Behind him he could hear the panting breath of his pursuers ; it was growing fainter, and he knew that he would reach the shelter of the trees with a long lead—but whether he could keep that lead when he had to climb through the wood remained to be seen.

He crossed the grass verge that surrounded the château, and tumbled across the ditch and over the railing that bounded the wood. The darkness here was intense—so thick that he felt as if a heavy black cloth was bound over his eyes. However, there was nothing he could do but blunder upwards, trusting to his hands to ward off the trees.

For a while he climbed steadily and then, hearing shouts from below him, he paused to listen. It was as well that he did.

Torches and lanterns began to appear on the level ground near the château, and he caught glimpses of hurrying figures. None of them seemed to have much idea of what they were doing, until a bellowing voice which he recognized as belonging to Strauss asked a question which he did not catch. There was a moment's silence, and then a voice answered from the

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edge of the wood. The man must have been one of the pursuers from the front door, because he called up into the wood as if his fellow had gone on ahead of him.

There was no answer, and Melrose, straining his ears to discover the reason, suddenly heard a shuffle of feet within a few yards of where he was standing.

The man must have had the eyes of a cat. He came at a run straight for the tree against which Melrose was pressed, and although he swerved blindly the fellow saw him and had him gripped in a bear's hug before he had moved a yard.

As they crashed to the ground the man let out a yell of warning to his friends below. Melrose heard the answering shouts, and settled down grimly to fight for his life.

The man was as strong as a bull. His great arms were locked round Melrose's chest, pinioning his arms above the elbows, and although Melrose strained every muscle to break loose, the man only growled and tightened the vice while he continued to cry directions to the searchers. His intention was obviously to hold Melrose prisoner until the others came, and he seemed likely to achieve his purpose. Lights were already moving among the trees less than a hundred yards below.

Melrose arched his body, and dug toes and fingers into the ground in what seemed a final despairing effort to break free, and then he went limp ; his head lolled against the man's chest, and his breath died in a sobbing gasp.

The man chuckled with triumph and called out

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gleefully to his friends ; the mighty Englishman, he told them, has no breath left in his body, he is as limp as a puppy in my bear's hug—and, still chuckling, he loosed one hand and propped up Melrose's head with his thumb. It was a foolish move.

Next instant he was on his back with Melrose's knee in his stomach ; one hand throttled him, while a fist banged like a trip-hammer three times in quick succession on his temple.

He gave one gurgling yell, which brought a chorus of inquiring shouts from below, and then lay still.

Melrose leapt over his body and continued his way up the hill. His chest pained him with every breath he took, and the six sword-pricks from Pierre were a smarting present he could have done without, but the darkness was no longer a black pall before his eyes. He could distinguish the trees now without first bumping into them, and as he neared the top edge of the ridge he slackened his pace.

It was unlikely that madame's servants would pursue him over the brow of the hill. In her own valley madame was mistress, but even Strauss, her tame gunman, would hardly dare to chase him along a main road where the blazing lights of a car might reveal the gun in his hand.

As if to prove the correctness of his theory the twinkling lights came no higher than the place where he had left his battered assailant. He thought he heard Strauss's angry voice urging them on, but they had no stomach to face the sort of battering their fellow had received. Unless they could bunch together for protection they refused to climb higher, so that Strauss had

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to admit defeat. They picked up the unconscious man and departed downhill. Melrose, watching from above, saw the lights dwindle and disappear, and he knew that he was safe.

His first greeting to his hard-won freedom was to throw back his head and fill his lungs with the night air. Draught after draught, cool and scented as wine, poured new vigour into his blood. Reaction had brought on a trembling of his knees and fingers ; his heart, he discovered, was thumping twice as fast as it should ; but slowly the beat returned to normal. The stress of that last encounter with the enemy had almost beaten him, and the mad plunge up the hill after he had broken from that bearlike hug had not helped. But he was resilient as rubber. Five minutes of deep breathing, and he could begin to think of other things besides his own aches and pains. The wood came to life around him ; he saw a star wink between two branches, and the glorious scent of the pines was in his nostrils.

"Funny how dead the world goes when you're running for your life," he murmured, "but, by God, it tastes and smells grand when you've dropped the hounds."

A minute or so later he topped the ridge and cast to the left with the idea of finding the disused drive which Anderson had mentioned. So much had happened in the last hour that he scarcely credited his wrist-watch, which showed him that it was not yet eleven. But if it were so, then Price and Anderson had probably not arrived. Marcia had not told him when to expect them—nor how she knew they were

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coming, but both those questions could wait for an answer.

He found the disused drive and, after a little hesitation, decided that his best plan was to walk up and down until some one showed up. There was little danger that one of the enemy would come prowling after him ; they would spend the night licking their wounds.

He stepped out from under the trees on to what had once been a drive wide enough for one car. Now it was covered with pine needles, and only distinguishable from the rest of the forest by the lack of branches overhead and a hardness underfoot—as if stones had at one time been rolled in to bind the surface.

Pausing only to light a cigarette, he began his aimless strolling. Just over the brow of the hill on the château side a tree had fallen across the drive, making further progress for a car impossible unless one could find a way between the trees. It was not light enough to judge whether this would be feasible, but as he walked back along the drive he realized one thing that was quite impossible. A pine forest was no place to conceal a car ! There was practically no undergrowth, and although there might be boulders—as there were on the opposite ridge—they would not provide cover for a car the size of the Bentley.

He was just wondering rather uncomfortably whether Anderson had already realized this, and was in hiding somewhere else when there was a chuckle behind him, and he whipped round to see a shadow break away from a tree and walk towards him.

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It was Anderson, who chuckled again as he laid a huge hand on Melrose's shoulder.

"Of all the darned cheek!" he exclaimed. "Walking up and down my lady's drive as cool as an icicle! How on earth did you break loose?"

"A long story," Melrose laughed, "but it can wait. Is Price with you?"

"Here, sir."

A second figure came from the shadows and Melrose saw that he was holding out something. He took it and found that it was a gun.

"Price wouldn't trust me to give it to you," Anderson remarked. "He seemed to think I might lose it."

Melrose thanked his servant, and then bidding him keep eyes and ears open he led Anderson to one side, and sat down with him on the pine needles.

"Where's the car?" he asked.

"About a mile away," Anderson answered. "When I got Marcia's message . . ."

"Wait a minute! When and how?"

"By telephone—sometime before eight . . ."

"Lovely work!" Melrose murmured. "She must have waited till madame came down to dinner and then used her phone. Sorry—go on with your tale."

"She told me that you and Paul had been recaptured and that you wanted me here. As a matter of fact I'd been in a devil of a stew all day wondering what had happened to you, and we were coming along anyhow."

"Incidentally—how did you manage to escape?" Melrose interrupted him. "We've time on our hands, so you may as well spin the yarn now."

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"Nothing much to tell," Anderson answered. "I had a bit of a scrap round that aeroplane. François got his head bumped through the fusilage, and I was just dealing with Strauss when somebody cracked me over the skull."

Melrose nodded.

"Pierre! I heard that bit. You put in some stout work."

"Well, when I came round I was lying flat on my back. The scenery wasn't much to look at—mostly the belly of the 'plane—but as there didn't seem to be any one about I got up and had a look round. From somewhere down the valley I could hear people shouting to each other as if they'd lost something. That seemed to show that you and the kid were still free. I didn't know how to find you without giving the show away, so I thought the best thing to do was to go in the opposite direction. My legs were groggy; my head felt as if my brains were falling out, but I managed to climb up the closed end of the valley, and from there I worked round the back of the ruins and on to this ridge. It took me hours, and just when I thought I was safe I bumped into one of the search party. I can tell you, I was so fuddled that I just stood still and let my hair turn grey. If he'd taken my arm and asked me to go quietly I believe I'd have followed him like a lamb. Instead, he stared at me as if I were a ghost, and then he started to yell to his pals. That yell did it. I charged him and swung a fist as I was passing—it hit something soft, but whether it was his mouth or his tummy I don't know, because I didn't stop running until I was at

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the bottom of the hill, and found myself on the road. There I nearly stumbled into a motorist, and when I'd convinced him that I wasn't drunk, but that I had merely escaped from a lunatic asylum he ran me into Perignac. Actually he chose the police station, but as the hotel is just across the road I managed to escape arrest. From that moment to this I have done nothing but sleep and eat—with Price to temper the wind."

Melrose, listening to this escape, cursed himself for not doubling back on his tracks and following the road Anderson had taken. If he had done so Paul would probably have been safe now instead of lying in some vile cellar. But the thing was done, and he said nothing.

"About that car," Anderson continued. "Marcia's message was short, but I gathered that rescue work was indicated, so we collected a few things together—chiefly food, because I wasn't going to pass another thirty-six hours without eating if I could help it; also beer—which reminds me!—Price! Where's that beer?"

Price picked up a sack which he had laid by his feet and proceeded to extract and open two bottles of beer.

"Take one for yourself," Anderson told him, "and leave us the sack. I'm feeling thirsty.—You see"—he turned to Melrose—"all this stuff, including odds and ends like rope, guns, and battering rams, was just pitched in the car, and we made tracks for this spot. We hadn't gone a couple of miles before we picked up a puncture. I thought it had better be mended because

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we might be in too much of a hurry on the return journey, and there didn't seem any particular hurry at the moment. Next thing we found when we reached the end of this drive was that the gates were closed, and that there was an inhabited lodge with a very large and bearded man taking the evening air in the porch. I don't know whether you would have driven up to him, and asked him to open the gates, please, because I have come for Paul, but I didn't. I drove past with my eyes closed, hoping he wouldn't see me, and then I pulled up at the side of the road to think. It seemed madness to draw his attention to me by driving past again, but I remembered a place about a quarter of a mile back that seemed to be a cross between a garage and a farm—and that is where we left the car. I have not the slightest doubt that madame's chauffeur frequently calls there for petrol, and he will almost certainly be told about the mad foreigners who asked for a sack, and who set off like burglars into the night, but it was the best I could do. Finally, it may interest you to know that these woods are private. There are large notices to tell you so, and a four-foot wall with broken glass on top to give you a very shrewd hint."

Anderson took a long pull at his bottle and leant back against the tree.

"And now," he said, "perhaps you will tell me what you are doing here?"

Melrose recounted briefly all the incidents that had led to his escape, and also what he had heard of madame's plans for Marcia and her father.

"The woman's a she-devil!" Anderson exploded

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when he had finished. "Why don't we go to the nearest policeman and give her in charge?"

"Because it wouldn't do any good," Melrose answered. "She would merely show him Thurston's letter and have us thrown out. We have no sort of case against her—at least, not one that the French police would understand. She has nothing to fear as far as the servants are concerned. None of them understand English, so they haven't the faintest idea of what it's all about. They only know that since we came they haven't had a moment's peace ; they have had their faces punched, their heads banged, and their insides knocked to a jelly. Soon they will be afraid to show their noses outside the walls, and if they can murder us without danger to themselves they'll leap at the chance. No, in this case possession is the whole ten points of the law. And it is up to us to take possession."

"Do we start in straight away ? "

Melrose hesitated.

"I'd like nothing better," he answered at last, "but I don't think it would be wise. To begin with, I doubt whether I'd last the distance. One way and another I'm too tired to think properly ; and I want to get a bandage or two on these pinpricks . . ."

"My God, I'd forgotten them. Are they still bleeding ? "

"No ; but I'm afraid they'd start up if I did any rough work. But there are other reasons. The hornets' nest will be too lively, and although I don't suppose they are expecting us, we should do no good by rushing in without a plan. Give me a night's rest

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and time to think—and we will do the trick to-morrow. Do you agree ? ”

“ Every time ! ” Anderson answered.

“ Then we’ll leave Price here to keep watch. He can sleep to-morrow when we get back.—Price ! ”

“ Yes, sir.”

Price came forward from the shadows and stood waiting for orders.

“ Mr. Anderson and I are going back to Perignac,” Melrose told him. “ I want you to stay here. Find out what sort of an outside watch they have set, and keep an eye on the drive to see whether any one leaves the château. No car has driven away while we have been here, but I have an idea that there will be some activity in the morning. One more point : Miss Thurston will try to show where she is being held. Circle the buildings when it is light, and look for a handkerchief on a window ledge. If you can let her know that you are watching, it is just possible she may try to get a message through. I can’t think of anything else, except that we shall be back about noon. Any questions ? ”

“ Am I to meet you here, sir ? ”

“ Where else ? ”

“ It occurred to me that I might find a better vantage point, sir. Anybody walking along here couldn’t help spotting us.”

“ He’s right ! ” Anderson exclaimed ; “ there’s not enough cover here to hide a bantam.”

Melrose nodded and thought for a moment.

“ Very well,” he said at last. “ Have a scout round, and if you find a better place leave a message under

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that fallen tree. But for heaven's sake keep this side of the valley."

"Very good, sir."

Price stepped back, Melrose and Anderson got to their feet. They walked down the overgrown drive in silence and branched off to the left through the trees before they came to the lodge. Anderson led the way along the wall until they reached the place where he and Price had climbed over.

"This is the only spot that is out of sight of both lodges and of the car park," he murmured. "The only people likely to see us climbing over are passing motorists or tramps. Even in daylight there should be no danger."

"Except from this broken glass!" Melrose answered.
"We must bring a rug and hide it under the wall."

They stripped off their coats and laid them over the glass. The road was clear and they dropped from the wall into the ditch. Two minutes later Anderson was knocking up the garage owner. The man appeared after a grumbling argument from his bedroom window ; he was plainly annoyed at being roused at this hour, and Melrose kept in the shadows ; the man was of the obstinate breed, and would most certainly ask awkward questions if he saw that the chauffeur had been replaced by a stranger.

Anderson's tongue and his pocket, however, proved equal to the occasion, and after warning the man to expect them in the morning, they left him to return to his bed while they took the road to Perignac.

Melrose was already half asleep. The night wind in his hair, the steady drone of the engine, and the

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reaction from the excitement of the last few hours worked on him like a powerful drug. He tried to keep awake by planning the next day's assault on the château, but his mind was too heavy. One thing only he could remember to tell Anderson :

" Will you send my father a cable first thing to-morrow ? " he asked. " Something like this : ' Persuade Thurston cancel financial arrangements. Also prepare to meet Strauss, who may be coming on business.' My father will understand. . . ."

Anderson promised.

In the hotel bedroom he bathed and bandaged Melrose's wounds. They were not deep, but he had lost a good deal of blood, and his clothes were ruined. Still, there was no damage that a night's rest, a fine physique, and an ample wardrobe could not remedy.

Melrose suffered his attentions with a drowsy eye, and when the last bandage was in place he sighed luxuriously.

" Don't let me sleep too long," he begged.

" Breakfast at ten," Anderson answered. " How will that do ? "

" Fine—if it's a real breakfast ! "

" It will be," Anderson assured him. He had reached the door when Melrose recalled him :

" Oh—and Bob ! "

Anderson turned ; he was surprised to hear how very much awake Melrose sounded.

" Yes ? " he asked.

" Do you think you could buy a packet of . . . firelighters in this town ? "

" Firelighters ! "

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Anderson thought he must be delirious, but Melrose only laughed.

"That's the idea," he said. "I have a feeling they will be useful."

He grinned at the blank astonishment on Anderson's face, and without waiting to see whether it was followed by the dawn of understanding he rolled over and went to sleep.

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AT half-past nine the next morning he was roused from his sleep and the bedclothes were stripped off him by Anderson.

"Wake up, sluggard!" Bob called out; "the bath's running over!"

Melrose stood up and stretched, only to groan and finger his wounds. Six isolated parts of his body felt as stiff as dry leather, but when the bandages had been removed and he had bathed he ceased to notice them. The night's rest had refreshed him hugely. There had been a moment in the woods when he had doubted the wisdom of leaving Marcia and Paul to the anger of madame ; it had seemed like a betrayal of the innocents to save his own skin. But now, with the sunlight pouring through the window and new strength in his veins, he knew that it had been the only thing to do. A clear eye and a strong arm would be needed to rescue them, and this morning he had both. He vowed, as he sat down to the breakfast which Anderson had ordered to be brought to the bedroom, that before another night was past Marcia and Paul would be free.

On the table was a package wrapped in brown paper. He asked Anderson what it contained.

"Your firelighters," Anderson answered. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me . . ."

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"I don't know myself," Melrose laughed, "but when you go to smoke out a wasps' nest you need fire. Tell me, did you send that cable?"

"I did."

"Good! My father will stop Thurston making a fool of himself, and I'd love to be present when madame hears that he has changed his mind."

"You, perhaps," Anderson said grimly, "but not Paul or Marcia."

Melrose did not answer. He felt as if some of the warmth had gone from the sun, and it was in a sober voice that he at length asked Anderson whether the car was ready.

Anderson nodded.

"So am I," he added.

Melrose pulled out his automatic, saw that it was loaded, and felt for the spare charges in his pocket.

"Have we enough rope?" he asked.

Once more Anderson nodded.

"Price knew the sort of thing you would want," he said. "A rope ladder which he brought with him from England and some lengths of whipcord."

"Then, we'll be going," Melrose answered. "Will you settle the bill while I see to the luggage?"

Anderson looked at him in some surprise.

"We shall not be coming back here?" he queried.

"Why should we?" Melrose answered. "When you have escaped from a lion's cage you don't go to sleep just outside the bars."

Less than an hour later they passed the lodge gates of the château and Melrose touched Anderson's arm.

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" You had better drop me here," he said. " I'll meet you by the wall. Bring the rug and this packet of firelighters. If the man is curious, tell him that it contains sandwiches. Hide the ignition key under the driving seat cushion and leave the car so that it is ready for a quick getaway."

A moment later Melrose was walking along the road and Anderson was driving on to the garage.

The disposal of the car and the scaling of the wall were accomplished without mishap, and they were soon winding their way upwards through the forest towards the fallen tree where they had left Price.

Birds sang in the branches, an occasional squirrel chattered as it crossed their path, but there was no sign of the enemy. The woods lay under the drowsy pall of summer, and although they walked warily, often pausing to listen, they reached the ridge top undisturbed.

Price was not to be seen when they reached the fallen tree, and after a few moments' search under the trunk near the roots they found the half-buried shell of a packet of Woodbines. These cigarettes, as Melrose knew, were his servant's favourites, and he picked up the packet.

Inside was a pencilled message :

" SIR,—I have found a place. Bear left across the hill from this tree till you come to dried-up stream. Follow stream down. I shall be on the look-out.

T. PRICE."

Melrose showed the message to Anderson, and they set out to follow its instructions.

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Some two hundred yards along the face of the hill they came to a sharp depression in the ground which bore traces of a heavy run of water in the winter. The earth had been washed away, and although the rocky bed was covered with a thin carpet of pine needles, this was evidently the stream that Price had found. They followed the bed, which grew deeper as they went farther downhill. At any moment they expected to see Price's grave face welcoming them from behind a boulder, but when they were more than three-quarters of the way down the slope, and there was still no sign of him, Melrose began to grow anxious. More than once he had caught a glimpse of the château between the trees ; they seemed to be going dangerously close ; any one chancing to look up from the terrace or the grass verge near the forest must surely see them. Either this was not the stream that Price had meant, or else he was in hiding above the place where they had met the stream.

"We'll risk another twenty yards," Melrose whispered, "then we must turn back."

They had, however, only gone a few steps farther down the dry watercourse when Melrose saw his man a full fifty yards below them. He was on the extreme edge of the wood, less than a stone's throw from the grass verge that surrounded the château. To follow him there seemed the height of folly, and both Melrose and Anderson stopped in their tracks.

But Price had seen them. He was standing with his back to a boulder that towered a foot or more above his head, and he made urgent "get down" signals with his hand. The vigorous pats towards the ground

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roused memories of past field days with the cadet corps at school, and, motioning to Anderson to follow him, Melrose crouched down so that his head was below the level of the banks and cautiously approached the place where Price awaited them.

It proved to be a waterless pool most admirably adapted to their purpose. In winter the stream which gathered in volume as it fell down the hillside would be trapped here to a depth of six feet or more, entering from the top through a cleft between two rocks and cascading from the bottom end over a smooth and water-worn boulder. Ferns grew round the lip and afforded perfect cover for any one wishing to overlook the château and the surrounding terraces which lay almost on a level with the eye.

There was ample room for the three of them to stand or sit at their ease in the hollow, and Price pointed out with pardonable pride that no finer vantage-point could have been found.

For a while they viewed the scene in silence.

The château itself lay slightly to their left, and from where they were standing they could look into the second storey windows. Except for two men who seemed to be refreshing themselves in the shadows made by an angle in the walls there was no sign of life. Château and grounds were asleep in the noonday sun. Directly in front was the wide sweep of the carriage drive leading to the massive porch ; flowers blazed in a border under the salon windows, and green sun shutters were closed over the windows of madame's suite which lay above the salon. Melrose noted with satisfaction that all the windows of her suite faced

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south—down the valley ; there were none overlooking the hillside where they were concealed.

A stone balustrade bounded the sweep of the drive ; below this balcony were terraced lawns and gardens, then the drive reappeared on its way down the mile and a half long valley to the *route nationale* at the bottom. Trees interfered with their view of this narrowing ribbon of road, but they could see enough to know that no one could approach or leave the château without their knowledge. And when Price pointed out a field away to the right with a building in it, and assured them that the building was the aeroplane hangar and the field the landing-ground, both Melrose and Anderson clapped him on the back and sang his praises as loudly as they dared.

" You shall sleep till the sun goes down," Melrose assured him ; " but tell me first whether you have anything to report. Has any one left the château ? "

" Not a soul, sir. One or two tradesmen's vans and a coal cart. But if you'll take another look at the flying field, sir . . . "

Melrose picked up the glasses and focused them through the narrow gap in the trees which gave a glimpse of the field. At first he could see nothing to arouse curiosity, and then he picked out the wing of a monoplane ; the rest of the machine was hidden behind the hangar, but he could see enough to make him exclaim :

" Marcia's ship ! So that is how he is going ! "

" About an hour ago they brought it from the hangar, sir," Price told him. " They started the engine and I thought some one was going to run for it. But

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they must have changed their minds ; they just tinkered about with it and then shoved it out of the way."

This information made Melrose thoughtful.

"I was expecting a car," he said at last, "but, of course, an aeroplane is better. It is ready to take Strauss to England. Madame must be expecting a letter from Thurston to say that the money transfer is completed, and as soon as she gets that letter Strauss sets off to frame the 'suicide' which will give her control of Paul's share."

"But why Marcia's 'plane ?" Anderson asked.

"Because it can land at Hammer Lodge without creating suspicion, and because Strauss will be virtually a messenger from Marcia to say how happy both she and Paul are with their mother. Thurston will be induced to commit 'suicide' because he is desperately lonely ; there will be a pathetic letter revealing his love and announcing the division of his fortune among his family. Unless Strauss bungles his job there will not be a shred of evidence to suggest murder. That, any way, is how I figure it out, and if they had a free hand I don't see how they could fail. Fortunately, they haven't. My father is waiting for Strauss, and will deal with him as he deserves, although I think it will save a lot of unpleasantness if our dear Herman stays where he is."

He took a last look at the aeroplane as if he would like to destroy it at once ; but the idea was too fantastic to be entertained for more than a regretful second, and he turned back to Price.

"Any more news ?" he asked.

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"Yes," Price answered, and his dramatic whisper showed that he was conscious of the stir he would cause. "I have found the room where Miss Thurston is a prisoner!"

All thought of an attack on the aeroplane vanished on the instant. Here was news of vital importance, and Melrose waited impatiently for his servant to continue.

"I went scouting as you had told me, sir," Price said. "But there wasn't anything to be seen in the dark, except the lanterns of the sentries. I counted six altogether: one at the front, one at the back, and two at each side, but I couldn't tell how many men were near each lantern, although I know there was more than one. As soon as it was daylight I hunted around for this place, and when I'd found it, I stowed the kit in that hollow and left you a message, sir.

He paused for Melrose to nod, and bid him get on with his tale.

"About four o'clock it would be, sir, when it was just getting light enough to see the house, I saw them change the guard. They seemed particular about those two men you see down there in the shadows; kept pointing upwards, and that gave me an idea. I moved along to the left until I was opposite, and looked at the windows through the glasses. Then I saw the hand-kerchief, sir. . . ."

"Where?" Melrose interrupted. "Which window, man!"

"Straight above those two men, sir. The first window from the right on this side of the house. First

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floor. The guards are changed every four hours. These two men came on duty five minutes before you arrived, sir."

Melrose snatched up the glasses. The window was open. From this angle he could only see a small strip of wall ; there was no sign of Marcia, and the handkerchief was gone from the window ledge.

" You won't see her, sir," Price told him. " Miss Thurston will keep away from the window after her talk with me."

" Her what ! " Melrose caught him by one arm and Anderson by the other. Both men shook him in their excitement.

" How in heaven's name could she talk to you ? " Anderson asked.

" By Morse, sir," Price answered gravely.

His questioners released his arms and turned to gape at one another. They stared incredulously as if they had heard of a miracle ; they glanced fearfully at Price as if he were guilty of a joke in questionable taste ; but his grave face and twinkling eyes, his stolid, square-shouldered figure which no miracle could ever ruffle, reassured them. If Price said that Marcia had talked to him in Morse, then it was so. They smiled, idiotically, hugely ; and they clasped hands in an ecstasy of mutual congratulation.

Price waited until this silent demonstration was over before he drew a slip of paper from his pocket and continued :

" I came as near to the edge of the trees as I dared, sir, as soon as I saw the handkerchief on the ledge, and I watched that open window through the glasses for all

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I was worth. For ten minutes I could see nothing but empty wall, then Miss Thurston came and looked out. I saw she was looking anxious. She stood just there like a ghost and looked up into the woods. All over she looked, but mostly up above my head, and I was wondering how to show her I was there. I got my handkerchief ready to wave, and held it where I knew those two men would not see it. Up and round her eyes went, and so slowly that I thought she would never look where I was. I tell you, sir, I was sweating under my collar, and I wanted to stand up and shout to her . . .”

Price broke off and wiped his forehead, as if even now the memory had power to haunt him.

“But she looked down at last?” Melrose broke in breathlessly.

“She did, sir,” Price answered slowly, “but she didn’t see me. I waved, but her eyes didn’t stop. They just went on, and then she shrugged her shoulders as if it was hopeless. I could see the misery in her face, and then she disappeared. I thought I should have died, sir. I’d failed her. If you could have seen her face, sir . . .”

Melrose nodded grimly.

“I can, Price,” he said. “I think I shall always see it looking out of that window in the dawn. I know just how . . .” He pulled himself together. “What did you do then?”

“I lay with the glasses glued to my eyes, hoping for her to come back, sir. There was nothing else I could do. Every minute the sky grew brighter. I was afraid that they would start to search the wood, and

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I'd have to move. But I was sure she would look out again, and she did—exactly a quarter of an hour later!"

Melrose caught his breath.

"She must have been doing it regularly all night," he whispered in agony.

"That's what I thought, sir," Price answered, "and I swore to myself that come what might she should not have to do it again. I watched her eyes same as before, sir, and when I saw that they were turning my way I stood up and I waved as hard as I could. I couldn't help it, sir," he added apologetically.

"I would have run out on to the grass and yelled like a madman if necessary," Melrose assured him. "Did she see you?"

"Yes, sir. Her eyes stopped turning, and I saw her put a hand to her throat. She seemed to go all stiff, and then before I had finished waving she had recovered. She snatched her handkerchief from the ledge and signalled to me to lie down. It was only then I knew that I had stepped out in full view of the two men under her window. But they hadn't noticed anything, being too busy smoking and keeping themselves warm. When next I looked at the window Miss Thurston was looking at me through glasses like mine —only smaller."

"Opera glasses," Melrose nodded. "Yes?"

"I showed her that I was still there, and then she began to wave her handkerchief up and down. At first I couldn't think what she was doing that for. Like a fool I put it down to her nerves being shaky, and then I guessed : she was flagging me. Short wave

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for dot, long wave for dash—and she was doing it like an expert ! Talk about an army signaller ! I was in the corps myself, sir, as you know, but strike me if I hadn't to keep my eyes wide open to read that message once I'd given her the word to go."

"What was the message ?" Melrose asked.

"Well, sir, the first thing she wanted to know was whether you were safe. I just nodded my head, and if you'll pardon me saying so, sir, the knowledge seemed to put new heart into her."

Melrose smiled.

"Thank you, Price," he said. "You are a messenger from heaven."

Price returned to his tale rather hastily.

"I've got the rest of Miss Thurston's call on this paper, sir," said he, "but not in full, because . . ."

"Tell us in your own words."

"Thank you, sir. 'Please tell Mr. Melrose,' it starts, 'entrance Paul's cellar is off back hall by gun-room. Madame and Benoit have keys. Dark all day down there. No one goes near him except madame, Strauss, or Benoit. I am to see him soon after ten to-night. Madame says his health will depend on question she will then put to me. I was shut in here after Mr. Melrose escaped ; tell him Pierre was still howling when I was escorted to bed. One of his front teeth came out.'

"This room is locked on my side ; guarded on other by two men. Madame says reception of some kind arranged for to-night. I am to be invited—if I am good. Also that Mr. Melrose's interference would make no difference to her plans.'"

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"We'll see about that!" Melrose answered. "Was there any more, Price?"

"Only that you are to act with the utmost caution, sir, and that she will keep to her room on the plea of a headache, so that you will know where to find her."

Melrose nodded and took the piece of paper which Price held out to him. His glance travelled from the paper to the window of Marcia's room and back to his servant.

"When we are out of this mess," he said, "I will try to thank you. Just now I can't think of the words . . ."

"Don't thank me, sir. If it had not been for Miss Thurston . . ."

"She will want to thank you too. And I bet she went straight to sleep after sending you that message?"

Price allowed a faint smile to twinkle in his tired eyes.

"Miss Thurston did say as how she would sleep happy now, sir," he admitted.

"Then she's probably still asleep," Melrose answered; "and it is time you followed her example. Can you find room here to lie down?"

Price pointed to a bed of ferns and pine needles which he had contrived under a ledge of rock.

"I'll sleep here like a log, sir, if you will excuse me. And the sack with Mr. Anderson's beer, sir, is in that corner by your feet."

Melrose grinned.

"All right, Price," he said. "We'll keep watch, and I'll wake you in plenty of time."

His servant rolled over and was asleep even before

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Anderson had drawn a bottle of beer from the sack, and the half of a veal-and-egg pie to go with it.

Melrose accepted his share absent-mindedly. His mind was already on the problem of how they were to enter the château, and the even greater problem of how they were to get out again with their prizes. From the moment of his awakening that morning he had been examining and discarding schemes ; now with Marcia's timely information to help him he had to go over the whole ground again.

One elbow propped on a rock ; his other hand automatically reaching for drink and food, he gazed down into the sun-drenched valley. Awnings were stretched down like the peaks of caps in front of the ground floor windows ; madame's shutters were still closed, and he imagined her resting in the cool shadow of her room ; a snake coiled in repose, ready to lift its head, and hood its eyes at the slightest warning. If he had not known she was there, or if he had not seen the deadly brilliance of those eyes, he would have wondered at his presence in this rock-bound hollow. The ferns through which he looked swayed to each puff of wind ; the valley was a thing of peace, distilling the scents of hot meadow grass, hinting at the presence of flowers over which was the droning of bees ; nearer still was the resinous fragrance of the pines. There was nothing in all this calm to account for his vigilance ; rather did it counsel a drowsy closing of the eyes and a surrender to sleep.

At his elbow Anderson munched steadily at his pie, pausing every now and then to take a long draught from the bottle. His back was to the valley, and he

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leaned comfortably against the same rock as Melrose. His job was to see that they were not surprised from the woods, and that was a task which need not interfere with his enjoyment of his meal. The solving of problems he left to Melrose, and when he had swept the last crumbs from his fingers he cocked an expectant eye over his shoulder.

"Have you found the answer yet?" he asked.

Melrose did not hurry his reply. The whole afternoon and evening were theirs to waste.

"There must be a dozen answers," he said at last, "but I can see only one. We shall have to climb in through Marcia's window, and that means getting rid of those two watchdogs."

"Do we rush them in the dark?"

Melrose shook his head.

"One yell of alarm and we'd have the whole pack after us. No, they must be my job. I will cross the grass as far up to the left as I dare, and then work along the wall behind them. With luck they will be watching the woods . . ."

"And without luck?"

Melrose shrugged his shoulders.

"We must have luck," he answered simply. "I will hold them up with my gun until you and Price, who are following, can come and truss them up. Tell me, how high would you say that Marcia's window was from the ground?"

Anderson picked up the glasses and examined the wall. He knew that the question was a vital one, and he measured the drop several times with his eye before answering.

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"About fifteen feet," he said at last, "certainly not less."

"I was afraid you would say more," Melrose said, "in which case we should have had to think of some other way. If Price stands on your shoulders, and I on his, we should just do it."

"Why not throw the ladder up to Marcia?"

"I daren't risk the noise. Remember those two men outside her door. Let me get my fingers within a foot of the window-frame, and I can fix the hooks on the ladder. Then I shall climb in and send Marcia down. Price will take her up through the woods to the car while you and I go for Paul."

"One moment. How about the men outside the door? Oughtn't I to come up and help you to deal with them first? If they were to raise the alarm . . ."

Melrose agreed.

"Yes, you're right. Follow me up and we will put them to sleep before we hand Marcia down to Price. I wish I could take her myself, but Price will shoot his way through hell rather than lose her."

Anderson made no comment, and after a gloomy silence, during which they both conjured up the dangers that would still lie between the girl and freedom, Melrose continued.

"We know where Paul is kept. We know that some time after ten, for a reason only known to madame, he is to be taken from his cell and shown to Marcia. Our one chance is to reach that back hall and wait for the gaoler who is to release him. We must get the key, find Paul, and be out of the château before madame wonders why he doesn't come. Our only way will be

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out of the back door, and to the right—the other side is blocked by the covered passage. There will be sentries, and I expect they will be armed. What is worse—Paul may be too weak to walk. You will have to carry him while I see that you get a good start. Pretend to climb the ridge over there on the other side of the valley, but as soon as you are clear of the pursuit work round to the left behind the ruins and make for this ridge. Price will patrol the road and lead you to the car."

"What about you?" Anderson asked.

"I shall be with you—I hope," Melrose answered. "But your first concern must be to run Marcia and the kid out of danger. Madame's sting will be drawn when they are gone, and . . . I can look after myself."

Anderson did not answer. They both knew that if Melrose were captured he would come back and Price with him.

Melrose looked at his watch. It was three o'clock. Seven hours to wait before they could act. For half an hour they talked over his plan ; they tried to improve on it ; they tried to foresee the pitfalls. They questioned Marcia's information about the reception and her promised meeting with Paul, and they both agreed that madame was going to use Paul to force Marcia into an engagement with Pierre, an engagement which she was to sanction before madame's friends. They could find no other explanation that fitted so well with their knowledge of madame.

But at length there was no more to discuss. Each fell back to a silent review of the odds against them, and it was Melrose who suggested that they should take it

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in turns to lie down. Not that he expected either of them to be capable of sleep, but any form of relaxation was preferable to this silent waiting.

"I believe you at seven," he said, and lay down as comfortably as he could under the lee of a rock, while Anderson returned to his vigil.

Melrose closed his eyes. The sun was slipping over to their side of the valley, and he felt pleasantly cool in the shadow. He forced mind and body to relax ; pictures of coming peril to Marcia and to Paul floated in front of his closed lids, but he resolutely ignored them. His plans were made, rest was more precious now than a panicky review of possible disaster, and after a time his will triumphed over his imagination, and contrary to his expectations he fell asleep.

He awoke to see Anderson bending over him.

"Nothing much wrong with your nerves," Anderson grinned. "Come on, up you get. I've got news for you."

"News!"

Melrose was on his feet in one bound and Anderson chuckled at his eagerness.

"I thought that would get you," he said, "although I doubt if the news is worth it. Strauss went by in the car about half an hour ago. . . ."

"Did he go to the flying field?"

"That's the odd thing about it. He didn't. I remembered your prophesy about the 'plane, and turned the glasses on the bit of drive by the hangar. He never even looked like stopping—and what is more interesting still : he was in evening dress!"

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Melrose was puzzled. He looked towards the flying field. The aeroplane was still there, but now it was in full view, and it looked as if it had been turned with its head into the wind ready for the take-off.

"When was that ship moved?" he asked.

"A few minutes ago," Anderson answered. "It almost looks as if Strauss's passing was the signal for them to get busy. What do you make of it?"

Melrose could not help him. The obvious solution that the aeroplane was waiting for Strauss's return was ruled out by his evening dress. Surely he wasn't going to make a night flight? And yet somebody was intending to fly—so much was certain. He gave up trying to think of the answer and advised Anderson to do the same.

"Get some rest," he urged. "We can do nothing about it, anyway. If Strauss means to fly he will. I only hope he breaks his neck!"

He tried to conceal his uneasiness by accepting the inevitable, but he did not succeed. That aeroplane was there for some reason; it was ready because madame had ordered it to be ready. He knew as surely as if he had heard it from her own lips that she would use it to foil him unless he could guess her purpose in time. And yet how could he guess? Suppose she had grown tired of holding Marcia and Paul prisoner, and was going to send them elsewhere? He would have to sit there and watch them go. The thought nearly drove him mad, and he was within an ace of calling Anderson and Price, and of rushing to the flying field. Only the knowledge that they would be rushing to almost certain capture made him hold his

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hand. And then as the minutes lengthened to an hour and nothing happened, he began to reason more hopefully. If madame had wanted to remove Marcia and Paul she would not have waited until evening. It could have been done openly by day, and would have served her purpose better, since two lives which were still valuable to her would not have been endangered.

He was still drawing comfort from this reflection when he was alarmed afresh by the return of the car. It did not stop at the flying field, and he breathed more freely. Two people got out ; one was Strauss and the other he could not see except that he was a small man in a black coat. They went into the house. Obviously the little man was a guest, and Strauss's journey was satisfactorily explained.

His attention was drawn to the grass under Marcia's window. The guard was being changed, and he examined the newcomers attentively. They were the men with whom he would have to deal, and he wanted to know what manner of opponents they would be.

One was a huge bearded villain whom he recognized at once as François ; nothing short of a crack on the head with a lead pipe would stop him from bellowing, and he felt that their chance of a silent entry had been reduced to a minimum. The other man he recognized after a careful scrutiny as the more timid of the two footmen who had watched over him for a night and a day ; the man had taken his money, but there would hardly be time to remind him of that, and besides—he carried a gun. So did François, the same double-barrelled shotgun which he had levelled so menacingly after they had landed in the glade.

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The more Melrose saw of the men he had to tackle the less he looked forward to the job. He was convinced that a revision of his plan was called for, and he decided that the first thing to acquire was a substitute for a lead pipe ; and the second was a helper with a strong arm.

While he was turning over the problem in his mind lights flashed on in the dining-room, and were extinguished as the curtains were drawn ; lights in the hall followed, and then, some time later, the lights in the salon.

He glanced at his watch. It was nine o'clock, but although the sun had gone from the valley, and the air was cooler, it would not be dark for another hour. Those lights in the salon troubled him. They seemed to show that guests were expected, but except for the car that had brought Strauss and the small man, the drive was deserted.

But he was tired of trying to solve the problems with which madame presented him, and he decided that it was time to rouse Price, and to tell him of their plans.

This he did as briefly as he could, and when he saw that Anderson was wide awake he called him to join them ; he explained his doubts about being able to hold up the two men and prevent them giving the alarm ; he also mentioned to Price his longing for a lead pipe or a sandbag.

"Leave that to me, sir," Price answered, and climbed out of the hollow.

He was gone for several minutes, and when he returned he was carrying two lengths of pine ; these he trimmed carefully with his knife ; he then ripped up the sack and bound several thicknesses of cloth round

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the end of each club. When he was satisfied, he handed the stouter of the two weapons to Melrose.

"You can hit as hard as you like with that, sir," he announced. "It won't make no more sound than a lady's kiss!"

Melrose weighed the stick in his hand.

"I believe you," he said; "and as you seem to know how to handle these things you will follow close behind me. I will tackle François, and you can tackle the other man. When Anderson has heard the lady's kiss twice he will join us."

He picked up the rope ladder and so disposed it round his body that it would not interfere with his movements; the steel grappling hooks went into separate pockets where they could not clink together and betray him. Each man took several lengths of whipcord, which had been so cut as to be ready for binding up any one who might get in their way. Various bits of sacking followed, these to be used as gags, and then Melrose found the packet of firelighters. A half-formed idea that he might use them to burn down the château had made him bring them. Now he was ready to cast them on one side, and he would have done so had he not had a sudden premonition that they might even yet prove invaluable. Fire, or the threat of fire, which these blazing scraps of tinder would give, was a powerful weapon if cunningly used, and he decided to include them in their armoury. The packet contained twelve impregnated bundles of shavings, and they each took four.

Their preparations were complete. They now had only to wait for darkness, and they stood side by side

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in the hollow while the last minutes of inaction ticked away.

The light slowly faded. Stars came out one by one into the pale green sky ; the opalescence grew dimmer, and the woods behind them settled down to their nightly silence. Melrose noted that the car that had brought Strauss was still there, and its presence raised another unanswered query in his brain before it was veiled by the darkness. He saw the two men by the front door, and knew that this time they were armed, then they too became shadows.

He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock.

"Zero hour," he muttered, and a moment later he and Price were sliding through the woods to the left of the hollow ; they crept downwards on the two unsuspecting men below, and Anderson was left behind to follow in five minutes' time.

The final assault on the château had begun.

CHAPTER 14 : ASSAULT ON THE CHÂTEAU

MELROSE led the way at a slant through the woods. Both he and Price had buttoned their coat collars high round their necks, and had pulled their hats well down over their eyes so that the revealing glimmer of shirt and flesh should not give them away.

Here, in the wood, they felt safe. No human eye could penetrate this darkness, but once they had climbed the railing and were on the grass verge Melrose halted in dismay. They seemed to be bathed in light, a sort of underwater radiance which made him feel naked and horribly conspicuous.

Price touched his arm and pointed to where a lantern shone under Marcia's window. He knew that his servant had sensed his alarm, and was showing him that the enemy were handicapped by this light which was so close to them. Even while he watched, one of them bent down to light a cigarette from the paraffin flame, and the sight gave him new courage.

Bent double, almost on hands and knees, they crept over the grass and came to the drive. Once again Melrose hesitated. He remembered his first crossing of the gravel, and how he had taken off his shoes. This time both he and Price were shod with rubber soles, and he decided to risk it.

An age seemed to pass before he felt grass under his

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feet again, but the crossing was accomplished at last ; the gravel had crunched under their shoes, but with no more sound than if they had patted sugar with their hands, and he led the way gratefully towards the deeper shadow under the château walls.

The wall they reached was the covered-in passage that led from the servants' quarters, and they paused for a moment to measure the distance still to be covered.

The two sentries were sitting down ; they could see the glint of light from the lantern on the barrels of François's gun ; the men were perhaps two yards from the wall, and their eyes were turned towards the wood. They sat so still that Melrose wondered whether they had already had warning of his approach.

Then he knew why they were listening so intently, and he began to glide along the wall as fast as he dared.

Anderson must have started ; he was a big man unused to woods, and to some one like François his progress would be as evident as that of an elephant through dry undergrowth.

They were still five paces away when Melrose saw François grip his companion's arm and murmur something in his ear, then both men listened with their heads on one side. After a few seconds they nodded to each other, and François picked up his gun ; he climbed to his feet, and his companion did the same. Slowly they retreated from the light, and as they did so François raised his gun.

It never reached his shoulder. A stick sang in the air behind him, and landed with a muffled thud on the crown of his head ; the gun tumbled from his nerveless

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fingers, and he crumpled in a heap on the grass. His companion slid down silently beside him.

Melrose dropped his club and began to truss his victim with Price's help ; they made an expert job of it, and had turned their attention to the second man when Anderson joined them.

The whole assault had run so smoothly and silently that even Marcia in the room above them, with an open window and ears that must surely be tuned to catch the first breath of a rescue, had not stirred.

Melrose straightened his back and looked up at the window. He half-expected to hear her low challenge, but none came, and when they had propped the two unconscious men in a picturesque pose against the wall with the lantern between them, and their guns out of reach, he motioned to Anderson to take up his position.

With legs firmly planted and hands braced against the wall Anderson waited for Price. He felt the servant's hands on his shoulders, and he swayed slightly as Price climbed up his back ; the man was as agile as a cat, and surprisingly light ; he waited until his burden was settled, and then he told Melrose to go ahead.

Thirteen stone is a dead weight that no man can carry for long, but when another ten is added, and the whole twenty-three stone is using you as a scrambling block, you have to have muscles of steel to withstand the strain.

Melrose felt Anderson's shoulders give under the weight, and heard him grunt. He dared not climb too fast for fear that the whole human structure would topple from the wall. It was difficult enough to reach

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Anderson's shoulders, and he was wondering how to complete the journey when Price withdrew one of his hands from the wall and touched his knee. An instant later his foot was cupped in the servant's hand, and he was being lifted upwards, while his nails clawed at the wall to give what help they could. There was a perilous lurch as his feet came to rest on Price's shoulders, but three pairs of hands flattened desperately against the wall and disaster was averted.

He felt the two men under him brace upwards to give him extra height, and he looked up towards the window.

They had miscalculated. With his fingers at full stretch he could not reach within eighteen inches of the frame.

Once again Price's quick wit and dogged resolution saved them. Melrose felt a hand pluck at his ankle ; his foot was raised until it was resting on the man's head. When he straightened his leg he had gained all the height he needed. The grappling hooks fell over the frame, and he eased his weight from Price's shoulders to the ladder.

His toes scraped against the wall, and then his hands were on the window ledge, and he pulled himself into the room.

His first thought was to warn Marcia.

She must have fallen asleep while she waited for them. She would be lying down. . . . It was pitch dark in the room ; he groped forwards with arms outstretched. His fingers brushed the back of a chair, slithered along a dressing-table and came to rest on the bed. They slid over the counterpane and reached

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the pillow—they swept across it from side to side : the bed was empty.

He began to search frantically only to give up almost at once, and admit the truth with a thumping heart.

Marcia was gone. His plans were knocked to pieces. He had been blind to this one chance, and he was faced with the breaking up of all his hopes. With Marcia safe he could have concentrated all his power on the freeing of Paul, and he knew he would have succeeded, but now . . .

A sound behind him was a warning that Anderson had followed him into the room ; he saw his shadow up against the window, and caught his arm.

"Marcia's not here," he breathed. "Call Price."

While he was waiting he forced himself to think clearly. He must not let his fears for Marcia jeopardize Paul's safety. They must follow out the original scheme except that now there would be no question of his leaving the château a second time without Marcia.

Price appeared in the window, and Melrose leant towards him.

"Are you sure this is her room ?" he breathed.

"Positive, sir," Price answered.

Melrose accepted his answer without further question and led the way to the door with Anderson at his elbow. He listened for a while at the key-hole, but could hear nothing, and he straightened his back.

He twisted the key and found that the door was unlocked, and then ran his hand up and down the edge of the door to make sure that there were no bolts. Satisfied that unless it was bolted from the outside,

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which was most unlikely, the door would open at a touch, he caught hold of the handle and gave Anderson a warning that he was ready.

The latch clicked softly, and then he flung the door wide open and stepped into the corridor, pistol in hand. Anderson followed him out.

They looked round in astonishment and their pistols fell to their sides.

The corridor was deserted.

Wall lights illuminated its length from landing to back stairs, and there was no place where two men could stand concealed. Of Marcia's guardians there was no sign.

Melrose wasted no time in speculating on their disappearance. No doubt they had accompanied Marcia to her new quarters, or they were attending her at madame's reception. Whatever the reason, he could not wait to solve it now, and with a sign to his companions he set off down the passage towards the back stairs. Paul had to come first now, and he wondered grimly whether he too had been removed.

The thick carpet deadened their footsteps, and Melrose led them along it at a run. A subdued murmur of voices from the hall challenged his attention and filled him with a vague foreboding, but he dared not stop to inquire the reason. That madame was about some devil's work he was sure, but the knowledge only served to wing his steps, and to steady his finger on the trigger of his gun.

The back stairs ran in one straight flight to a passage on the ground floor ; the passage, so far as he could judge, passed behind the main hall, and he hoped that

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they would be able to reach Paul's cell without entering the kitchen.

He was mistaken. A door barred their way, and when he opened it cautiously he found that he was looking into the kitchen. The crack through which he peered revealed the table at which the night watchman had slept, and a section of the wall beyond.

No one crossed the narrow line of his vision, and although he listened for a full minute he could hear no one moving about on the tiled floor.

More and more puzzled at this emptiness, which he guessed must be connected in some way with the hum of voices which had come up to them from the hall, he pushed the door wide open and stepped into the kitchen.

The lights were burning ; dishes of food lay on the table, together with knives and forks and a laden tray ; there were all the signs of a recent activity suddenly interrupted. It was as if the servants had laid down whatever they were holding in the first convenient place, and had obeyed an imperative summons. So might a busy kitchen look if a fire alarm had interrupted the servants at their work.

Once more the hum of voices in the hall intruded on his thoughts, and he knew that that was where he would find the missing servants. A whole household gathered in one room, but in heaven's name why ? If this was the reception that madame had mentioned, why had she summoned her servants to attend ?

It was a question without an answer, like the other problems of the aeroplane, and the solitary guest whom

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Strauss had been sent to fetch, and he put it on one side.

The kitchen was deserted ; that was a fact to be used—and used at once. On the far side, so hidden by the vast range that he had not seen it on his first early morning visit, was a door which led into the back hall ; he led his companions through, and they found that the hall also was deserted.

A rapid search revealed that only one door leading out of this hall was locked. There could be no doubt that this was the door to the cellar. Two bolts, one at the top and one at the bottom, were driven home, and were so arranged that a padlock on each prevented them from being withdrawn, while an old-fashioned lock in the centre completed the armoury ; the door itself was of solid oak and, short of a battering-ram, was unbreakable.

Anderson gazed gloomily at the padlocks and fingered his gun.

"Can't we smash them with bullets ?" he asked. "Price and I could keep Strauss and Co. off until you had snatched up the kid . . ."

But Melrose shook his head.

"We should lose the race," he answered, "and even if we won through by some miracle—there would still be Marcia. No, we must wait until some one opens this door for us or we can get the keys. I was terrified we should find the door open and Paul gone. If Marcia's information was correct, Benoit or Strauss will be coming. You, Anderson, must hide in there," he pointed to the gun-room. "Price, I want you to find out what devil's business is going on in the hall."

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Do so, but don't let yourself be seen, and get back into hiding here as soon as you can."

Price set off to obey his instructions, and went out the way they had come. Anderson went into the gun-room, and closed the door behind him without actually clicking the latch.

Melrose, left alone in the hall, wondered whether it would be safe to talk to Paul through the door ; he decided that he would try, and he bent down with his mouth to the keyhole, but before he could whisper the boy's name he heard footsteps.

He started to his feet and looked round for a place of hiding. The hall was as bare as his hand ; the one light threw every corner into high relief ; he leapt towards the gun-room to join Anderson and was about to enter when he realized with a shock that the man was coming that way. There was nothing for it but to remain where he was. His hand went mechanically to the light switch ; he clicked it off and crouched against the wall in the sudden darkness.

No sooner had he done so than he realized that he had made a mistake. The footsteps which he could hear distinctly on the wooden floor of the gun-room stopped at once. The man had no doubt heard the click of the switch ; he might even have seen the lights go out through the imperfectly closed door.

Melrose held his breath as he waited for his next move. Somewhere in that room Anderson was close beside him ; would he be able to stifle the alarm which the man was certain to give ? Ten seconds that felt like ten hours were measured by his beating heart, and then he heard a muttered oath ; the man's hand was

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on the door, and Melrose heard the hinge squeak as he opened it an inch or two. A beam of light from the gun-room struck across the tiled hall, and then to Melrose's lasting horror the oath was repeated, and the step began again. Only this time the man was hurrying *away* from the door.

Melrose switched on the light and sprang after him. Whoever the man was, he must be prevented at all costs from returning to the hall to raise the alarm.

The door flew open under his hand, and he stood spellbound with relief at the sight that met his eyes.

Anderson rose like an avenging giant from behind the chair where he had been hiding. Two strides took him to the astonished man, who proved to be Benoit, and before the fellow could cry out Anderson clapped a huge hand with numbing force over his mouth ; his other arm swept round the man's waist, and, lifting him from his feet, he bore him backwards past Melrose and into the hall. There he cast him on the ground, taking care that his knee should land full in the pit of Benoit's stomach.

A gurgling groan and a rush of breath on the palm of his hand told Anderson that Benoit's lungs must be as empty as a vacuum, but to make quite sure that the man's active life would suffer a prolonged lapse, he lifted his head and banged it with resounding force on the tiles.

Melrose shut the gun-room door and fell on his knees beside the unconscious man. He wasted no pity on him, but began at once a hurried search for the keys. He found them on a ring in his coat pocket, but when he tried to take them away he nearly pulled the

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man's head off. Only then he discovered that they were slung from a cord, and he ripped it off impatiently.

The bunch contained more than twenty keys of all sizes, and bidding Anderson bind and gag Benoit he turned his attention to the cellar door.

Several keys looked as if they might fit, and he wasted a precious minute before he found the right ones. At last the bolts were free, and he drew them in a fever of impatience. The door yielded to his hand, and telling Anderson to bring Benoit with him he went to look for Paul.

It was pitch dark inside the doorway, but the light from the hall revealed a flight of stone steps. A dank smell came up from the depths, and his voice as he called softly to Paul echoed and re-echoed as if he were standing at the mouth of a cavern.

"There must be a light switch," he murmured, and remembering that his hand had touched a second knob in the hall, he went back and pressed it down.

Dim bulbs similar to those in the covered passage behind the servants' cottages showed that the steps went down in a steep spiral, and he took them at the run while Anderson followed more slowly with his burden.

The steps led to a vaulted cellar from all sides of which opened stone arched passages, some long as if leading to other cellars, some short and ending in iron gates.

He had expected nothing so vast, and he stood momentarily appalled by the task of finding Paul quickly in this network of passages.

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Then he called out and began a feverish search of each of the separate cellars. It was Anderson who eventually found the boy. They had exhausted the cellars that surrounded the central hub, and were ranging farther afield when Anderson heard a pitiful voice coming from one of the longer passages.

Half-way down the passage they found another gate ; clinging to the bars and sobbing a pitiful appeal for help they found Paul.

His sobs changed to a choking, hysterical laughter when he saw Melrose, and he reached his hands through the bars to feel the comfort of friendly hands.

Melrose consoled him with a promise that if he would keep quiet and get back from the bars they would have him out of his prison in a few seconds. The gate was locked, but he had Benoit's keys in his pocket, and before Paul had managed to control his sobs they had joined him in his cell.

While Melrose helped the boy to dress, he noticed that although Paul was badly frightened he did not seem to have been physically ill-used. A camp bed had been placed along the wall ; there was a table, one chair, and a cheap washstand ; beyond those few furnishings the cell was empty. If the room had been above ground such simple fare would have served, but what made madame's inhumanity a thousand times more infamous was that there was no window—not even a grating high up in the wall.

For forty-eight hours, except when Benoit or some other brought him food and turned on the dim bulb, Paul had lived in utter darkness. Such treatment was enough to drive a grown man insane, and Melrose felt

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the sweat beading his temples as he pictured what the boy must have suffered.

Anderson's fingers were trembling as he bent down to tie the boy's laces, and when he stood up Melrose saw that his mouth was set in a grim line. Melrose drew him to one side.

"You will have to take charge of Paul," he said. "Price could not carry him over the hill as you will have to. We will go back the way we came—to Marcia's room. It is the only way you can manage alone."

Anderson nodded, and swept the boy up into his arms. He was so light that he felt he could carry him half-way across France if need be.

"Keep quiet, son," he whispered, "and don't worry. We'll move so fast they'll think we've got wings!"

Melrose also whispered a word of encouragement and ran his fingers through the boy's damp hair before he led the way down the passage.

He was in a hurry. They had wasted more time in the search for Paul than they could afford, and he would not be easy in his mind until he had seen him disappear with Anderson into the wood. Then only would he be free to rescue Marcia from that she-devil. Even now it might be too late.

The agony of doubt spurred him forward, and he reached the end of the passage several yards ahead of Anderson. He was eager to rejoin Price, who should be waiting for them at the top of the cellar steps, and he rounded the corner at a run.

"Stay where you are, Mr. Melrose—and put up your hands!"

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The command was ripped out with a snarl, and he pulled up as if he had been slogged on the jaw. Slowly he obeyed—there was nothing else he could do, for Strauss was leaning against the pillar at the foot of the steps ; his evil mouth was open in a triumphant leer, and his automatic was levelled at Melrose's heart.

Strauss waited till his hands were above his head, and then changed his aim to Anderson.

" You too," he ordered ; " and put the boy down in front of you so that I can see what to shoot."

But Anderson had already turned away, and, continuing to ignore the other's gun, he set Paul down against the passage wall in such a way that Strauss could not see him. Then, and only then, he raised his hands in the air and walked forward to join Melrose.

The scowling fury on Strauss's face warned Melrose that something was happening behind him to put them in deadly peril. Strauss's finger was tightening on the trigger, and he tensed his muscles for the spring that would smother the gun with his body—but the need never came.

Strauss realized in time that he had them at his mercy, and his finger relaxed. He spat contemptuously on the ground.

" You silly ——" he sneered. " You nearly had a bullet through your guts. What good will heroics do you—or the brat ! I have come to fetch him, and by —— I will ! I might have known that —— Frenchman would bungle the job."

Even in this dim light it was plain to see that he had

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been drinking heavily ; his face was red with liquor, and his eyes were glazed, while the dinner jacket he wore only emphasized his air of debauch.

Melrose lowered the lids of his eyes and pretended to study the floor at his feet, whereas in reality he was watching every movement of the gun. One moment it was pointed at his ribs, then it swung towards Anderson, who stood a pace to one side. Strauss's condition would make it easy to grab his wrist and turn the gun aside, but his finger was on the trigger, and he would certainly fire the gun before he could be disarmed. The noise of the report would be deafening, and somehow he must be prevented from firing.

Meanwhile, Strauss went on talking, while Melrose wondered what was keeping Price.

"Madame—my wife—wants her son," Strauss sneered.

"Your wife!" Anderson exclaimed in astonishment.
"What are you talking about?"

"Surprises you, doesn't it?" Strauss chuckled coarsely. "Think I'm not good enough, eh? Well, you're wrong, —— wrong! I don't risk my neck for nothing. I've got her here—see," he tapped his breast pocket with a suggestive leer. "One more little job and then she pays what she owes me, and a bit more. I shall be boss of this ruddy castle. No one's going to push me around . . ."

He broke off with an oath as if he realized that he was talking unwisely, and he stuck out his jaw.

"Don't think you've got anything on me," he growled, "because you won't live to repeat it. Now

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fetch that white-faced brat before I plug you," he said to Anderson. "Pull any more tricks and I'll . . ."

Anderson turned to look inquiringly at Melrose, who nodded as if he were intimidated by Strauss's menaces.

"You'd better go," he agreed; "our friend is impatient."

"You shut your —— mouth," Strauss snarled.

Melrose shrugged his shoulders and was silent, but he moved slightly to one side so that he could watch Anderson's going, and yet keep a wary eye on Strauss's gun.

Anderson walked slowly across the cellar. Melrose saw him reach the end of the passage, saw him bend down as if to pick up Paul, and held his breath as he waited for his next move. Paul had apparently moved farther up the passage; Anderson called to him gently, and before Strauss realized what was happening he stepped forward and disappeared.

That was the move Melrose was expecting. There was an instant of time when Strauss's gun was pointing at the empty air, and when his half-fuddled wits failed to gather the meaning of what he saw, and in that instant Melrose brought the edge of his hand down like a knife with withering force on his wrist.

The automatic spun from Strauss's fingers and fell with a clatter on the stones, while Melrose drew back his fist for the blow that would finish him.

But for the second time within a couple of minutes he was robbed of the need for action.

Before the blow could land; before Strauss could begin the yell of pain and fury which was starting to his lips; even before his gun had come finally to rest,

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he was felled by a blow from behind which cracked his skull and tumbled him lifeless on the ground.

Melrose saw him pitch forward and lie with arms asprawl, and then looked up to see Price standing on the bottom step. In Price's hand was the club of pine wood, and he was looking at it lovingly.

"I am sorry I didn't get here sooner, sir," he said gravely, as if the killing of a man were a matter of the most ordinary routine.

Melrose grinned.

"You came at the right moment," he said, going on one knee and turning Strauss over so that he could search his pocket. "All clear above?"

"Yes, sir, they're in the hall, and Miss Thurston is with them . . ."

Melrose nodded grimly.

"So I imagined. Now it's time we were going."

He stuffed a wallet and various letters into his pocket, and rose from his knee just as Anderson came forward with Paul in his arms.

"I'll lead," Melrose announced. "Price, you follow Mr. Anderson."

Gun in hand he climbed the stairs. The back hall was empty ; he paused to listen at the door into the kitchen, but hearing no sound, he pushed it open. The kitchen was also empty, and they hurried across it and up the back stairs and along the passage to Marcia's room. The room was as they had left it, and leaving Price on guard at the door to guard against a surprise attack, they went to the window. The ladder was drawn up on the window-ledge, and after a glance below and a pause to listen, Melrose

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lowered it to the ground. The two watchmen were still there and still unconscious, which was not surprising considering the devastating effect of the pine truncheons and the fact that barely ten minutes had passed since they had been assaulted.

Melrose took Paul from Anderson's arms.

"Get on the ladder," he said, "and I will put Paul on your back. Once you are down make straight for the woods, and once you are in the woods make straight for the car. I will give you two minutes to get clear. If you run into trouble, fire your gun and Price and I will come along."

Anderson climbed out of the window, and with his feet on the ladder waited until Paul's arms were round his neck.

"Where do we meet?" he asked.

"*Hôtel du Roi* in Paris," Melrose answered. "I am known there. We shall join you to-morrow."

He spoke confidently, more confidently than he felt, as Anderson well knew, but there was nothing to be gained by lingering, and with a final promise to deliver Paul safely he slid down the ladder.

There was a slight thud as he reached the ground, and Melrose saw him twist Paul from his back into his arms, then with a wave towards the window he set off at a steady run across the grass. He showed for a moment in the light of the lantern and then became a moving shadow; his feet crunched on the gravel drive, and Melrose's grip tightened on his gun. The sound seemed to cry out their purpose more loudly than any they had yet made, and he waited for the alarm which he was sure would come.

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But it did not ; the night kept its stillness, and soon the flying figure with its precious burden was swallowed up in the black darkness of the forest.

Melrose forced himself to stand by the window for the two minutes he had promised. Every second while he stared down on the dark bank of trees was stolen from a precious store that belonged to Marcia ; her happiness, perhaps her life, might pay the forfeit for his delay, and yet as he stood there, motionless and intent on the scene below him, he knew that she would approve. No sacrifice was too great if it ensured Paul's safety. She, in a moment of folly, had brought him to this prison ; one man had died, and others had suffered through her action. Melrose did not blame her for that. Strauss was evil, and the others were the servants of evil, but he knew that Marcia was paying for her folly, and he prayed that the penance was nearing an end.

Once he fancied that he heard the faint snap of a twig ; once he thought that a watchman stirred beneath him, but that was all. No gun was fired from the wood, and at length the two minutes of his vigil were over.

"Gone away ! " he murmured with heartfelt relief, and he turned his back on the window. Now, at last, he was free to settle his final account with madame.

Price was at his post beside the door ; they left the room and went towards the landing. They lay down on the thick carpet and wriggled cautiously towards the banisters, and then Melrose lifted his head and peered down into the hall.

CHAPTER 15 : THE GAME IS PLAYED

THE lights were blazing.

Every corner of the room was revealed as it had been for the first time when madame pressed down the switch at the start of his duel with Pierre. The chairs and couches had once more been pushed aside—but there the resemblance between the two scenes ended.

Instead of a bare floor, and two men fighting with naked blades, the hall was crowded. Row upon row of men and women filled every available space. That they were servants was apparent from their dress, and from the respectful undertones in which they talked. They must have numbered more than fifty, and they seemed to be waiting for some promised play to begin. All had their backs to the stairs and were looking expectantly towards the far side of the hall.

Melrose followed their example, and his glance was arrested by a group of four people who stood apart from the rest.

Madame was there listening to Pierre. She was dressed in royal purple and crowned with a magnificent diamond tiara ; jewels glittered in her ears, on her fingers and round her wrist. Her slightest movement sent a thousand sparkles winking into the light ; she was a queen before her dazzled subjects, and she held

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herself proudly. But her flesh had the pallor of corruption in Melrose's eyes ; her lips were set in a cold line, and she made no sign that she heard what Pierre was saying.

But he did not seem to care. He talked on elegantly and posed in front of the staring servants. He believed himself an object of envy in his immaculate evening dress, and his happiness would have been complete had he not been conscious of the missing front tooth which marred his smile. Even that he did his best to conceal with a white gloved hand.

Melrose spared only a fleeting glance for madame and her nephew ; his whole attention was held by Marcia's tragic loveliness.

She stood with them but not of them ; a little man in black talked unnoticed at her elbow ; she made no pretence to listen, but stared straight ahead ; her dark eyes seemed to look straight at Melrose, but he knew that her thoughts were not behind them. She saw nothing in the room around her ; she heard nothing of the piping voice of the old man at her side. Her thoughts were away on a journey of their own, a hopeless journey from which she saw no escape and which, despite her proud courage, set her lips trembling and her fingers plucking at her gown.

As long as he lived Melrose would remember the dazzling picture she made as she stood there aloof among her enemies. A captive in her ivory gown, she was stared at by oafs, like a girl in a slave market ; the room hummed with talk which he knew was of her, and he longed to leap down among them with a whip.

When at length he broke the spell which she had

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cast on him, and he forced himself to look away, he saw the table spread with a white cloth which stood between her and madame, and he understood the full meaning of madame's reception.

The table was an altar. In the centre of it was a golden cross, to either side of which were candles. And the small man in black was the priest whom Strauss had been sent to fetch.

Many things which had puzzled Melrose were plain in that moment. The waiting aeroplane was to carry the bride and groom—not Strauss. The car was left at the door for the same reason. Madame had planned this immediate marriage as an effective counter to Melrose's escape. Somehow she had compelled Marcia to accept Pierre publicly. There would be fifty witnesses to prove that the wedding was voluntary. But why had Marcia consented so readily? Even that he could guess. Paul had been used as the goad to prick her forward : Paul's health or her freedom ; that must have been the infamous choice offered. She had chosen marriage with a simpering libertine, and Paul was to be produced as a witness of good faith.

Melrose had seen all that was necessary, and he drew Price back out of earshot.

Close behind them was a door leading into madame's suite. It was ajar, and Melrose entered the room with Price. Here they could talk without being overheard and without risk of being seen from below ; they would also have warning of any new development down below.

"Where were those light fuses?" Melrose asked as soon as they were alone.

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"In the passage that leads from the kitchen to the hall," Price answered.

"Good. Now listen carefully. In a few minutes madame will grow tired of waiting for Paul to appear, and she will do one of two things. Either she'll send some one else to see what's up or else she'll go on with the service without them. She must not be allowed to do either. Have you got those firelighters with you ? "

Price nodded.

"Then go down the back stairs into the kitchen. Find a poker, tongs, toasting fork—anything that will serve as a skewer—and fix two firelighters on the end of two skewers. Then go to the fuse box. Set a light to your torches and to the spare firelighters ; wait till they are burning well, then pull out all the fuses. As soon as you have done that, hurl the two firelighters over the people's heads in the hall to the front door, then rush into the room yelling as hard as you can and waving the two torches like a lunatic. Be as blood-curdling and as ferocious as you can, because the more panic you cause the more chance we shall have. Carve a way for yourself straight to the front door and get it open somehow. There will be men on guard, but they won't know you, and if you play your hand well and shout "Au secours ! Feu ! Feu !" you may even drive them into the house. Miss Thurston and I will join you at the door. You will leave me your torches and run out to the car. Get it going and bring it to the steps—shoot any one who attempts to stop you. Is that all clear ? "

"Yes, sir," Price answered promptly.

"Then off you go—and set the fireworks going as

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soon as you can. If anything goes wrong fire your gun as a warning. I will look after Miss Thurston, and you must get out by the back way. *Hôtel du Roi*, Paris, is where we meet if you are mislaid."

He grinned and Price assured him that nothing would go wrong. They gripped hands, and Price slipped away.

Left alone in the room, Melrose glanced round him without interest, and was prepared to follow Price as far as the landing when a thought struck him. The room was madame's bedroom ; a huge four-poster with a hanging silk canopy stood against the wall ; cushions, chairs, a couch were covered with rich brocade ; there were long silken curtains drawn across the windows.

He felt in his pocket for two of his share of the firelighters and set them burning. He was delighted to see how the flames shot up among the shavings without seeming to consume them, and when they had caught a firm hold he tossed both firelighters on to the bed. One landed close to the curtains at the foot, and the other among the pillows at the head.

He watched them for a second until the first flames licked up the curtains.

"So much for the basilisk's nest!" he murmured.
"May she burn as readily!"

Pulling his gun from his pocket he left the room and closed the door behind him ; then he walked to the landing and leaned over the banisters. Concealment was no longer necessary, but although he stood there quite openly, no one saw him.

The scene was much as he had left it, Pierre was still

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talking, so was the priest, but Marcia had lowered her eyes, and madame was showing signs of impatience.

Suddenly she cut into Pierre's inane flow of banalities, and at the sound of her voice all other sounds were hushed.

"Why don't they come!" she demanded. "First Benoit, then Strauss; two grown men to fetch a miserable boy!"

"Have patience, madame," Pierre urged with a boldness that came from a sense of his importance to the occasion. "You forget that Paul would be in his bed. They must first dress him—it is only *convenientable*."

Madame favoured him with a contemptuous stare.

"I forget nothing," she said. "Ten minutes to dress a boy! We will continue without them."

"Ah, no!" Pierre protested. "Who then shall give away the charming bride?"

He waved a gloved hand towards Marcia with affected gallantry, but she did not notice him. Her cheeks were flooded with rich colour and her heart which had seemed like motionless lead in her breast until a moment ago was beating tumultuously.

Raising her eyes to make a last supplication she had found herself staring at a vision. John was there on the landing; he was leaning on the hand-rail as if he were watching a play from the balcony, and as her eyes met his he smiled encouragement. A lazy smile that brought a lump to her throat and sent the blood racing through her veins. Then he put a finger to his lips and signed to her to look down. She obeyed instantly, and as Pierre came towards her she was a very picture

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of bashful confusion at the approach of her lover ; a murmur of sympathy ran through the watching servants.

"See how she blushes !" Pierre cried in fatuous self-congratulation. "I could gaze on her so great perfection for an age. . . ."

"And I will wait no longer," madame said. "Monsieur the priest—to your book and your ritual !

Melrose raised his gun and started to walk down the stairs.

"I think not !" he said. "Monsieur the priest would do nothing so blasphemous !"

There was a rustle as the servants turned to stare at the intruder ; and startled exclamations as they recognized him. "The Englishman !" The word ran like wildfire from mouth to mouth. His exploits had kept their tongues busy ; the women had been afraid to venture outside the château after dark, the men had told stories of his diabolical strength and the mad gleam of his blue eyes ; after the fashion of peasants they were ready to credit him with supernatural powers, and now here he was, sprung from nowhere, forbidding the priest to do his duty, threatening them with death from the gun in his hand.

Melrose waved his gun in a menacing circle over their heads. He saw the impression he had created, and pressed home his advantage.

"Those who value their lives will keep silence," he commanded. "And they will not move. Madame, your mistress, knows that I do not come alone. My friends are watching you. Put your hands above your heads—all of you !"

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A hundred hands were stretched upwards at the sharp command, and he continued on his way down the stairs. Men and women backed away as he advanced across the hall. They feared the merciless blue of his eyes as much as they feared the glinting barrel of his gun. As he approached the group by the improvised altar the priest took comfort in the colour of his cloth. He was shivering with fear, but he was a brave man.

"What is the meaning of this outrage!" he stammered.

"You will learn in good time," Melrose answered easily as he took his place by Marcia's side, and felt her hand slip into his. "The outrage is not mine but madame's—and her nephew's."

Pierre was white to the lips; all the swagger was gone from him and he tried to sneak out of range, but Melrose recalled him contemptuously.

"Come here!" he called. "Nearer! Now then we will hear the truth. Will you swear before your priest that Miss Thurston loves you? And that she has told you so?"

Pierre mouthed a protest which no one heard and Melrose gripped him by the lapels of his coat and shook him like a rat.

"Answer me!" he said.

Pierre cast a despairing glance for help at madame and then at the priest, but they neither of them moved. He was forced in his extremity to rely on himself, and he proved to be too great a coward even to lie.

"No," he whispered.

"You knew she hated the very sight of you?" Melrose persisted, and Pierre nodded miserably.

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"So, monsieur the priest," Melrose added, "you see what devil's business brought you here? This scented scum would have compelled Miss Thurston to marry him in spite of her contempt. As for you, Pierre, if ever I see you again after to-night, I will whip the skin off your back!—And here's a sample of what will happen to you. . . ."

He loosed Pierre's coat and crashed his fist into his mouth. Pierre let out a howl of agony and sat down heavily; there he remained, dribbling blood over his shirt front, spitting out teeth, and whimpering pitifully; after the first startled exclamations which greeted his fall, no one paid him any attention; they were too busy watching another more entralling drama.

Melrose took advantage of the momentary disturbance that followed Pierre's collapse to draw Marcia nearer the front door. At any moment now he might expect Price to set off his fireworks, and he did not want madame on the wrong side of him. So far she had made no move of any kind to obstruct him. But her composure was perfect; not once since his arrival on the scene had she shown either fear or annoyance; nor had she changed her position except to move one hand to straighten the girdle round her waist, and the only sign of interest she displayed was a quick glance at the landing above Melrose's head when he said that his friends were watching.

Melrose believed that he owed his immunity to her belief in the presence of those friends, but he was wrong. That one searching glance had confirmed her suspicion that he was bluffing, and she was quite content to wait until he was ready to listen to her.

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With Pierre reduced to incoherence, and only servants to bar his way to the front door, he faced her for a last word.

"You need not wait up for Paul," he told her. "The boy is out of your reach. Don't count on Benoit or Strauss—they have met with accidents. Above all, do not expect the money for which you were willing to commit murder, to shut your son in a dark cellar, and to marry your daughter to a man she loathes—because you will not receive a penny."

"You sound very pleased with yourself, Mr. Melrose," was all she answered.

"I shall be better pleased when I leave this château, madame," he said. "And I wish that you were in your bed at this moment—though I doubt if you will ever sleep there again."

As he spoke he fancied that he could hear the crackle of flames above his head, and he began to draw Marcia slowly backwards towards the door.

"You have a busy night before you, madame, if you are to save a roof above your head," he promised grimly. "We will say good-night."

"Wait!"

She did not raise her voice, but her tone was imperative and he obeyed instinctively.

"So Paul has gone?" she asked softly.

"He has."

"Ah, that is a pity, but I still have you, Mr. Melrose, and my charming English daughter. It would be a shame to lose you also."

Melrose felt an unpleasant premonition that something was wrong, but he answered calmly.

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"A shame which you will have to add to your many others, madame," he said.

"We shall see!"

She was still fingering her girdle, and now, without the slightest sign of haste, she drew a small revolver from one of its folds. Melrose saw the butt in her hand, and levelled his own gun at her breast.

"Stop!" he cried. "If you raise that gun I shall shoot you dead!"

There was no mistaking his sincerity, but madame was not impressed. She considered the gun in her hand, and she kept it pointed towards the ground, then she looked him full in the eye.

"There are men, Mr. Melrose, who would shoot a woman—but you are not one of them. It would be murder—and you do not murder. Last night Pierre was at your mercy, and you spared him because you were squeamish. That was a mistake. It will be a mistake if you fail to shoot me now that you have the chance. See, I am waiting."

Melrose felt Marcia's hand on his arm. He knew that he couldn't shoot. She deserved to die, he would willingly send her to the gallows or to rot in prison for the rest of her life, but he could not murder her even though she held a gun in her hand.

"I said I would shoot you if you levelled that gun," he said, "and I will."

"Once more, we shall see. In the meantime—Marcel!"

She called suddenly to some one in the crowd of servants, and was answered after a moment by a hoarse voice. The man, like the rest of his fellows, had been in

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a trance as he watched the duel of wits between his mistress and the Englishman.

"Marcel, you and some others will guard the front door," madame added.

"And I forbid you!" Melrose answered instantly. "My friends will shoot the first one of you who moves."

"Fools!" madame cried as they all remained motionless. "His friends are not here. He is alone, and cannot look two ways at once, so you are safe—he is too afraid of my little pistol to turn round."

She waited and flashed angry eyes over her servants. They lowered their heads and shifted uncomfortably on their feet, but not one of them dared disobey the Englishman who carried death in his eye.

"So," madame said at last; and Melrose could not help admiring the way she took her defeat. "So I must prove to you myself that his friends are not here, although an imbecile would know that he would have called them to him long ago if they had been hiding upstairs."

She turned away from them in contempt and faced Melrose again.

"My men are afraid of you, Mr. Melrose, but I am not," she said proudly. "At the end of ten seconds I will raise my gun slowly. You are at liberty to fire when you like—but you will not fire because it would be murder—and Marcia would not forgive you if you murdered me."

"What happens when you have raised your gun?" Melrose asked.

"I shall not fire either. It is not my intention to kill

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you, but to keep you here as a witness to my nephew's marriage with my daughter. Of course, if you do not believe me, you will shoot—and all these people shall be witnesses to my death."

Melrose did not believe her, but he had to admit that the gamble was a bold one. She was staking her life on the belief that he would not kill a woman however great the provocation, and every one in the room—even Marcia—would call him coward if he shot her before she raised her gun. And even if she raised it he would have to hold his hand because she had promised not to shoot.

The position was absurd, and before she could begin counting he told her so. Quite plainly now he could hear the fire raging above them, and he played for time. Price would surely put an end to this suspense within a few seconds, and until he came he must humour this woman who was playing so desperately with her life and with his.

"Think before you count, madame," he urged. "You plead your sex—but if a snake threatens me I do not wait to see whether it is a female before I shoot. You deserve no pity, and before God I swear that if you raise that gun I shall shoot you!"

He felt Marcia's hand tighten on his arm, and heard the hissing breath of their audience. Madame alone appeared unmoved by his threat.

"So be it, Mr. Melrose," she said, "you have stolen my son, you have prevented the marriage of my daughter, and now you threaten to murder me in the presence of my servants and of this priest. I call them all to witness that I am only protecting myself against

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a thief, and if you kill me they will see that justice is done."

She paused and then raised her wrist with its jewelled watch to her eyes.

"My watch is small," she said, "and I cannot measure the seconds very accurately, so I will wait until the second hand reaches the top of its circle—that should be in less than half a minute."

Melrose swept Marcia behind him and stood waiting with grim lips. In the breathless silence that ensued he could hear the ticking of his own wrist-watch, and he could feel the beating of Marcia's heart as she pressed against him, but above all was the insistent roar of the fire. Surely these others must hear it too! But they were too intent on the drama before their eyes; even Pierre had stopped his whimpering and allowed the blood to trickle unnoticed through his swollen lips.

The half minute was over and madame looked up. The pupils of her eyes were twin points of black fire, which gazed unwaveringly at him. Her body was erect, the hand which circled her gun was steady as the marble hand of a statue. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, it began to lift, and Melrose saw that she was smiling faintly as if she were enjoying this play with death.

His finger tightened round the trigger, and he altered his aim by a few inches so that his gun was pointing at her shoulder. Directly her gun was in line with the toe of his shoe, he told himself he would shoot.

And then events moved with bewildering speed.

There was a clamour of voices outside the front door;

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it was burst open in frantic haste, and two men shouted and gesticulated wildly : The house was on fire ! They had come to warn madame !

For an infinitesimal part of a second Melrose's concentration wavered, and madame's hand flashed upwards. He saw the flame, and hurled Marcia aside at the same moment. The bullet flew wide, but a yell of agony from behind showed that it had found a mark in one of the new-comers.

Before madame could fire again he had recovered his aim and pulled the trigger. He saw her stagger and drop the gun—and at that moment the lights went out.

The pandemonium that ensued was terrifying. Women screamed, men cursed and shouted and trampled in a mad endeavour to escape this new terror. They were tried beyond endurance, and when two balls of fire flamed over their heads and burst in a shower of sparks against the door the panic was indescribable. Those who were near the stairs ran screaming up ; those who were nearest the kitchen tried to escape that way, only to find the screen crash down on their feet, and to see a raving madman charge them with two flaming torches in his hands. He waved them in scarlet circles round his head and they gave him room, leaping aside with strangled sobs of fright.

As soon as the light failed, Melrose dropped his gun and swung Marcia into his arms. A tide of struggling humanity was between him and the door, but he burst his way through. Twice he stumbled ; once a wildly swinging fist caught him a blow on the head and he reeled ; once a man clung to his knees, and he kicked himself free savagely.

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He reached the door a second after Price, who had had an easier passage, and he set Marcia down behind him ; he took the two torches and kicked the other two firelighters into the rapidly thinning crowd of servants while Price opened the door.

Yelling, swinging his torches and watching the servants milling frantically in the doorways, he waited for Price to bring the car to the door.

Less than a dozen servants remained in the hall. They were those who had been knocked down in the struggle, and were now crawling after their luckier fellows, a few were nursing wounded heads and moaning, but Melrose had lost interest in them.

The torches in his hands threw fantastic shadows on the walls and gleamed on Pierre's white shirt front ; the man was crouching with his head in his hands, apparently too afraid to move. Melrose glanced past him with amused contempt, but was held fascinated by the figure next to him. Madame, her jewels sparkling in rivers and rings of fire, had drawn herself up to her feet. Her right arm hung limply by her side, and her face was ghastly white in the flickering light of the torches. She leant against the table with its gleaming cross of gold.

The priest in his black habit stood behind her, and gave what help he could. He was a brave man ; the only one to remain with her now that she was despoiled, and at her command he picked up the small revolver and handed it to her.

Melrose, with the torches held high above his head, saw as in a dream her fingers close round the butt, and her eyes raised to meet his across the width of the hall,

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They were cold and passionless, utterly unafraid, and they compelled him to remain motionless.

He was not afraid ; he knew that in a moment or two she would gather the last of her strength, and lift the little jewelled toy in her hand, and that she would fire. But the door was wide open behind him ; he could already hear the surge of the car as it came forward over the gravel. One step and he would be swallowed in darkness. She was too weak to prevent him ; her movements too slow and laboured.

So he stood, with Marcia, a white ghost at his shoulder, while he waited for her to make her last bid. Pity, wonder, and admiration were in his eyes, and he knew by the pressure of her hand on his shoulder that Marcia shared his thoughts.

Madame swayed forward from the table and stood upright.

"We were disturbed, Mr. Melrose," she said softly, and he noticed once again that her voice was curiously like Paul's. "But there is light enough to finish our little experiment now. Are you ready ? "

"At your service, madame," he answered, "except that I am unarmed."

"And I must use my left hand," she replied, "so the chances are almost even."

Slowly she began to raise her arm, but now the slowness was not of her own choosing. Every inch gained was won by an indomitable will ; her arm was a lead weight. The jewels on her fingers quivered as she put forth all her strength, and Melrose heard her breath come in painful gasps.

The gun lifted until it was pointing a yard in front

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of his feet, and he had decided that it was time to leave her to her agony, when there was the crash of falling woodwork, and the hall was flooded with dancing light.

The door of madame's room had warped and sprung from its hinges under the heat of the fire. A huge billow of smoke lit from beneath by orange flame burst through the opening, and the air was full of sparks, and the sounds of splintering wood.

The glare seemed to quench the torches Melrose held and even to dim the lustre of madame's diamonds ; it painted her face in cruel light, and revealed the agony she endured. But when she gave up trying to lift her gun and looked up at the raging havoc in her room, Melrose knew that he was revenged. Her frozen calm was broken ; her face grew old and haggard, and a desperate cry was drawn from her lips. It was the cry of a woman who sees the destruction of the things she loves, and is powerless to save. Paul, Marcia, the lives of the servants meant nothing to her ; but this château with its precious pictures, its lovely rooms, its gracious furniture was her very life. She had been prepared to kill and rob to add to their beauty ; without them her own life was worthless.

Had she the strength she would have turned the gun on herself, but it fell from her nerveless fingers, and she sank to the ground.

Melrose turned to Marcia.

" Will you get into the car ? " he said. " I will join you in a moment."

The priest was kneeling by madame's prostrate body.

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Melrose pushed him gently aside and picked her up. Signing to the priest to follow, he took her out of the house and laid her down on the terrace.

He bound up her wound as best he could with his handkerchief and the priest's, and then he took the man on one side.

"She is not dangerously hurt," he said, "nor is the château irretrievably damaged. Tell the servants I have gone, and they will help you willingly enough to get the fire under control. One of madame's men is in the cellars—get him out as soon as may be, unless you want his blood on your head. That is all."

"But, Monsieur—" the priest, who was clutching his golden cross, asked him mournfully, "Why have you done this terrible thing?"

"Ask madame when she wakes," Melrose answered grimly. "She put gold and fine possessions before human souls—and she has her reward."

He turned on his heel and climbed into the car.

"Stop at the flying field," he told Price.

Marcia was trembling as he sat down beside her.

"The look—the look on her face," she said.

Melrose caught her hand and carried it to his lips.

"You mustn't take it too much to heart," he said. "A few sticks of furniture, a few pictures, a hole in the roof, what sort of price are these compared with the light in your eyes and Paul's happiness? Madame is evil; she would be better dead, and you must not let her stricken look in the moment of defeat blind you to reality."

"I know you are right," she said, "but . . ."

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Melrose laughed.

"But you are sorry for your enemy? And are you also sorry to be free?"

Before she could answer they had stopped outside the flying field, and Melrose helped her to alight; he also took a rug which he found in the car.

The hangar was deserted, and when he expressed surprise at finding a field illuminated with flares, a waiting aeroplane and no mechanics, Price told him that they had passed some men running towards the château; the men had tried to question him, but he had waved them aside.

"Then we must be off at once," Melrose answered. "They may think we are more important than the fire and return."

He waved Price up into the rear cockpit and then turned to Marcia.

"Will you get aboard and play with the switch?" he asked her.

But Marcia looked at the night and shivered.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To Paris."

"Why can't we use the car?"

Melrose saw that the reaction had made her obstinate, and he answered as patiently as he could.

"In the first place, this is your aeroplane, and I don't see why we should leave it behind. Secondly, the car does not belong to us; and thirdly, madame will be on our trail as soon as she recovers."

"With a broken shoulder!" Marcia retorted scornfully.

"No, by telephone, and I have no wish to play hide-

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and-seek with the French police at this hour of the night."

Marcia looked as if she would protest further, and he sighed wearily.

"Do you climb in with your own sweet legs, my lady," he asked, "or do I have to put you in?"

Something in the tone of his voice made her suddenly ashamed of her mulishness, and she laid a hand on his sleeve.

"I am sorry," she said. "Will you forgive me and . . . help me?"

She was caught up and swung on to the wing; and as she climbed into the cockpit and felt for the controls she was no longer proud or obstinate, but very humble and eager to obey.

Melrose swung the propeller, and the silence was shattered by the crackling roar of the engine. Marcia moved away from the controls as he joined her in the cockpit. He leaned over until his lips were brushing her hair.

"The ship is yours, my lady. Won't you fly us home?" he asked, and then lifted his head to receive her answer.

She smiled and shook her head.

"You promised me a flying lesson," she said. The words were blown into the night, but he saw the smile and was content. He wrapped the rug round her and watched her sink down out of reach of the wind from the propeller, then he opened the throttle and ran between the line of flares.

They circled the château twice, and Melrose banked

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as steeply as he dared to give Marcia a last view of her prison.

The servants had returned. They could be seen running to and fro in the glow from the fire ; some were salvaging furniture and pictures from the salon, others were pumping water on the flames. From their orderly behaviour it seemed probable that madame was once more in command, and Melrose was not surprised to see the fire hoses and other up-to-date fire-fighting equipment. Living as she did more than ten miles from the nearest town, madame had taken her own precautions and, as was to be expected, they were admirable.

With a final salute to the defeated, he set the aeroplane on an even keel and headed for Le Bourget. Roughly two hundred and fifty miles. He looked at the clock on the scuttle. It was just eleven o'clock—one hour only after he had crept from the hollow with Price to begin the assault on the château.

In two hours they should reach Le Bourget, and be in the hotel by two—a good four hours before Anderson and the boy. He foresaw difficulties at the aerodrome, and he cast a sidelong glance at Marcia, meaning to ask whether her papers were in order. . . .

But Marcia was already asleep—or seemed to be, and after securing the rug, which had slipped from her throat, he did not disturb her. They would pull through somehow.

The hooded lights on the instrument board splashed a pool of gold on Marcia's hair, and shone on his bruised knuckles where Pierre's teeth had torn the skin. He looked from one to the other and smiled. The roar

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of the engine in his ears, and the cold night wind on his face completed his contentment. To-morrow was another day, but this moment was supreme, and the past had been enriched with memories.

.
There is little more to tell.

Melrose was well served by his friends at Le Bourget, and though they wondered to see him arrive in the middle of the night with a girl in a white evening gown, a servant but no luggage, they asked few questions, and soon found a car to take him to the hotel.

Anderson and Paul duly arrived in the small hours, and slept soundly through the day, so that it was not till late afternoon that they all gathered in Paul's bedroom and filled in the gaps in the story.

Anderson had nothing to add, since his escape with Paul had been uneventful, but when Melrose had finished his yarn he pulled a wallet from his pocket and displayed a document.

" You may remember that this wallet belonged to Strauss," he said, " who, by the way, is not as dead as we supposed. When Price was on his way to put out the lights he heard a noise coming from the back hall, and found that Strauss, whom he was sure he had killed, had managed to climb up the cellar steps, and was staggering across the hall. Price decided that the man must be removed, and he pushed him back into the cellar and bolted the door. So much for Strauss —now for his document : He must have doubted madame's word and made her sign this paper as an earnest of good faith. As you can see, it is a promise of marriage to become effective within six months of

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Mr. Thurston's death. The implication is obvious, and I fancy that madame will keep very quiet when she hears that this paper is locked in my bank—to be used at the first hint of trouble."

He folded the paper carefully and put the wallet back in his pocket. For a while no one spoke. Each was busy with his own thoughts, and it was Paul who finally broke the silence in a startling manner.

"I have a letter too," he said, and felt in his trouser pocket, from which he withdrew a crumpled piece of paper. He read it through, and then with a sly glance at Marcia he handed it to Melrose.

"Perhaps you had better keep this too," he added.

Melrose glanced from the note to Marcia and saw that she had flushed scarlet. She knew that it was the one in which she had told Paul to go with Pierre, and she wished that the ground would swallow her. Only pride kept her from running away, and after a miserable silence she was able to speak.

"I am sorry, Paul," she said. "I . . . I didn't realize what I was doing."

She got up and walked out on to the balcony. Melrose swore under his breath and followed her.

She was leaning over the railing apparently absorbed in watching the traffic, but he saw that she stiffened at his approach.

"Paul's a heartless young devil . . ." he began. But she stopped him.

"No. He's right. You'd better keep that letter in a safe place in case . . ."

"Yes?" he prompted her.

"Just in case I am tempted to break out again," she

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answered slowly. "I've always done mad things, as you know, but none of them was quite so mad or . . . or so selfish as that trick I played on Paul."

"You made amends when you stood by that altar with Pierre," he told her, "and again when you risked your life to strike up Strauss's arm when he shot at me as I was escaping; and again when you brought me my cigarette case."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it," he said firmly. "You've paid a hundredfold for a moment's folly, and it's time to think of something else. Why, for instance, do you think I have risked life and limb . . ."

"To save Paul," she answered hurriedly.

"And?"

"So that I should not die of remorse."

"That also. I'd no idea I was so unselfish—what else?"

"Oh, because you like fun and games," she answered wildly, "and because I couldn't get out of the mess without your help, and . . ."

"And Bob Anderson's and Price's help," he added gravely.

She was beaten.

"What's the use?" she cried. "We both know the real reason, and I am so thankful to be free that I could almost . . ."

He waited, but with the laughter that seemed to spring to her lips so spontaneously now that the danger was over, she moved away from him and took refuge beside Paul in the bedroom.

Melrose was content to wait for a more definite

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answer, and while they were discussing how to celebrate he suddenly remembered Tony Lockhart's aeroplane.

"Poor old Tony," he exclaimed. "We were too busy rescuing ourselves to think about his Percival Gull. Do you suppose they left it lying in the forest?"

"Not if I know madame," Anderson answered, "unless François tore it to pieces with his teeth before she could stake her claim."

Melrose turned to Marcia.

"Some day," he said, "when we feel like fresh excitement we must pay madame a call. Perhaps she will show us her new roof. . . ."

"And Pierre's new teeth. . . ."

"And the cellars where Paul was imprisoned."

"And her little revolver. . . ."

"And the glade in the wood where we left poor Tony's aeroplane!"

"You also forgot his binoculars," Anderson reminded him.

"So we did—in the hollow on the other side of the hill!"

"Together with several bottles of beer!" Anderson moaned. "So we must go back!"

Marcia laughed and slipped her arm under John's.

"But not just yet," she pleaded. "The quiet pastures are my playground from now until . . ."

"The spirit moves us," Melrose answered. "No man can say more than that."

THE END

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